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Exploring the beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers

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Exploring the beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers

by

Angela Christi Baum

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty

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This is to certify that the Doctoral dissertation of

Angela Christi Baum

has met the dissertation requirements of Iowa State University

Signature was redacted for privacy.

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For the Major Program

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For the Graduate College

DEDICATION

To Sally McNulty, Amanda Hollander, and Carri Clopton

Mom—I am so thankful for you. I cherish your friendship, value your advice, and admire your wisdom.

Mandy—I am in awe of what you have accomplished in your life. Who would have thought that my little sister could be such a wonderful role model!

Carri—You truly are "my biggest fan." You have been a constant source of support and encouragement throughout this process. Thank you.

You all have modeled strength and determination in difficult times and your successes have been my inspiration.

To the rest of my family:
John McNulty, Denny and Vicki Baum
Phillip and Bryan Baum, Eric Hollander
My grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins

God has blessed me with a family who provided the love, support, and encouragement needed to accomplish this. Few are as fortunate as I am to have such a dedicated cheering section.

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CHAPTER 1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Rationale

The study of student beliefs can have important implications for teacher education programs. Evidence suggests that students' beliefs upon entrance into their teacher preparation program may influence the ways in which students experience their teacher training (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Hollingsworth, 1989). In order to help students shape their belief systems into those appropriate for working with young children, teacher educators must be aware of students' beliefs and, in turn, provide students with the opportunity to reflect on their own beliefs and how those beliefs influence their action (Green, 1971; Renzaglia, Hutchins, & Lee, 1997).

When exploring the beliefs of preservice teachers, it is important to understand the multiple influences that serve to shape students' thinking. For example, Holllingsworth (1989) stated that prior experiences play a critical role in the development of teachers' beliefs surrounding teaching and learning. In addition, research on the impact of teacher education on preservice teachers' beliefs has yielded information suggesting that experiences such as coursework and field experiences also contribute to the shaping of students' belief systems (McDermott, Gormley, Rothenberg, & Hammer, 1995; Renzaglia et al., 1997).

While there are increasing numbers of studies conducted in the area of preservice teachers' beliefs, few of these studies relate specifically to the beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers (Bredekamp, 1996; Lin, Silvern, & Gorrell, 1998). The few studies that have been conducted with early childhood education majors suggest that early

childhood teacher education programs do have an impact on the formation and alteration of preservice teachers' beliefs (Lin et al.), but further exploration into the nature of these beliefs and their development is needed. Finally, using the information learned about preservice teachers' beliefs, Renzaglia et al. (1997) stated that an additional challenge lies in identifying the "practices in teacher education that may serve to nurture and develop in preservice teachers beliefs and attitudes that dispose them to value and use particular skills, strategies, and knowledge" (p. 360). Future research needs to explore approaches to teaching early childhood education students, such as a constructivist approach, in relation to the impact that they have on the development of preservice teacher thinking.

Dissertation Organization

This dissertation begins with a general introduction followed by two papers. The first paper is a literature review on issues relevant to understanding and exploring the beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers. The second paper is a qualitative study exploring the beliefs of nineteen early childhood preservice teachers, including a discussion of the major findings and implications for early childhood teacher education and research. Following the second paper, there is a general conclusion, briefly summarizing the two papers. Finally, the dissertation ends with a list of all references used in both papers.

CHAPTER 2. EXPLORING THE BELIEFS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PRESERVICE TEACHERS: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A paper to be submitted to the Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education

Angela C. Baum

Early childhood educators function in a variety of roles. They work with children in public and non-public settings, from birth through age eight. This includes working in settings such as home intervention programs, child care centers, preschools, kindergarten programs, and early primary programs including first to third grade classrooms. Early childhood educators work with children from a variety of backgrounds with a range of learning needs. They are also called upon to interact with families and a variety of professionals including other teachers and administrators. Often they work closely with speech and language pathologists, physical and occupational therapists, and social workers. The myriad of roles fulfilled by the early childhood educator makes preparing these individuals a complex process. Different early childhood settings require different levels of training, from a high school diploma to at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. Typically, the training requirements for educators in child care agencies are lower than those for professionals with state teaching certifications who work in public educational programs (Spodek & Saracho, 1990).

This review of literature will focus on issues relevant to the preparation of teachers enrolled in teacher education programs at four-year colleges or universities. In addition, this literature review highlights research substantiating the importance of studying the beliefs of preservice teachers, and provides an overview of research

completed in this area. In light of the fact that research examining the beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers is sparse, this literature review includes several studies related to the beliefs of primary and secondary preservice teachers. It is likely that the findings of these studies can shed light on issues relevant to the field of early childhood teacher education. Finally, in relation to influences on the development of preservice teachers' beliefs, this literature review explores the application of constructivist theory to early childhood teacher education and the impact of this approach on student learning.

Early Childhood Teacher Education

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), in accordance with the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC/CEC) and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) (1996) recently described five standards adhered to by good early childhood educators. They described a good teacher as being committed to students and their learning. These teachers believe that all students can learn and adjust their practice based on knowledge about their students' interests, abilities, skills, knowledge, and family experiences. They also understand how children develop and learn, being aware of how context and culture influence children's learning. Good teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to children. They "appreciate how knowledge in their subject is created, organized, linked to other disciplines, and applied to real world settings" (p. 56).

In addition, good teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning. They are able to engage groups of children to promote a disciplined learning environment and can organize instruction to allow goals to be met. Good teachers also

think systematically about their practice and learn from experience. They model curiosity, tolerance, honesty, fairness, respect for diversity, and appreciation of cultural differences, all virtues they wish to inspire in children. They "critically examine their practice, seek to expand their repertoire, deepen their knowledge, sharpen their judgment and adapt their teaching to new findings, ideas, and theories" (p. 57). Finally, good teachers are members of learning communities. They collaborate effectively with other professionals and are knowledgeable about the variety of resources available to themselves and their students. They also find ways to work in cooperation with parents, involving them in their children's learning.

Early childhood teacher education programs are designed to foster the development of the above knowledge, attitudes, skills, and ethics in early childhood preservice teachers and consists of four components: general education, foundations, instructional knowledge, and practice (Saracho & Spodek, 1983; Spodek & Saracho, 1990).

Early childhood educators foster the development of children's knowledge and skills across all areas of the curriculum. Thus, early childhood teachers must draw upon their understanding in a variety of core areas. According to NAEYC et al. (1996), teachers of young children use their knowledge of a wide variety of disciplines to make decisions and judgments such as, "distinguishing between powerful, core ideas and topics and those of lesser importance, setting ambitious but reasonable expectations for student learning, and sequencing activities in ways that make sense conceptually" (p. 77). There is general agreement that early childhood teachers should have a broad knowledge in the areas of the humanities (history, language, and literature), the biological and physical

sciences, the social sciences, math, and the arts (NAEYC et al.; McCarthy, 1990; Spodek & Saracho, 1990). According to Spodek and Saracho, the general education component usually constitutes from two-thirds to three-fourths of the teacher education program and is heavily concentrated during students' first two years in the program.

The second component of early childhood teacher education programs, educational foundations, is concerned with knowledge of education rather than with professional techniques. For early childhood teacher educators, a critical portion of this component is the knowledge of child development (Peters & Klinzing, 1990; Spodek & Saracho, 1990). One of the primary tenets of early childhood teacher education is that teachers need to display an understanding of child development and learning and an ability to apply this knowledge in a variety of areas, including physical, social, emotional, language, aesthetic, and cognitive domains (Bredekamp, 1996). In addition to understanding how children develop and learn, teachers need to recognize diversity as an influence on children's development. They use this information to make decisions on how best to foster children's physical health and growth, development of social skills and emotions, language acquisition, and understanding of cognitive concepts (NAEYC et al., 1996). Assuming that an early childhood teacher has a fundamental understanding of child development, teachers are able to provide developmentally appropriate experiences for young children. According to Bredekamp (1996), this provides a framework in which the teacher can make adaptations to accommodate the individual interests and learning needs of each child.

The third component, instructional knowledge, requires students to take courses helping them develop skills in planning and implementing educational programs.

including early childhood curriculum and instruction (Spodek & Saracho, 1990). Based on current theoretical perspectives concerning how young children learn, early childhood teachers are called upon to develop, plan, and implement curricula that allows children to actively construct knowledge (Bredekamp, 1996). Teachers of young children must have the ability to identify and implement a variety of teaching strategies and make use of a variety of instructional materials. They also must be aware of how to design experiences that challenge, support, and provide opportunities for all children to succeed, regardless of their learning needs (NAEYC et al., 1990). Instructional knowledge also includes the development of skills such as classroom management, assessment, working with children with special needs, and working with families and communities (NAEYC et al.; McCarthy, 1990).

Finally, the practice component of teacher education programs includes pre-student teaching field experiences and a student teaching experience in which faculty in teacher education programs collaborate with experienced teachers in early childhood settings. The goal of these experiences is to allow students to link their coursework to their classroom practice. Many of these experiences are provided as a laboratory component to a corresponding course and emphasize both observation and participation in an early childhood setting. For students enrolled in early childhood teacher education programs, this component usually concludes with a student teaching experience which includes allowing the student to assume total responsibility for teaching a group of children (Spodek & Saracho, 1990). According to Spodek and Saracho, practice is often considered to be one of the most critical components and offers the following benefits: improving teacher behavior and performance, increasing professional attitudes and

commitments to teaching, facilitating teachers' understandings and acceptance of children with disabilities, and increasing teachers' use of indirect teaching methods.

In response to recommendations from NAEYC, DEC/CEC, and NBPTS, a recent national trend involves unifying curricula from the fields of early childhood education and early childhood special education (McMurray-Schwarz & Baum, 2000). These organizations advocate for the inclusion of children with special needs in programs traditionally serving typically developing children. This has prompted an increasing number of teacher education programs to prepare early childhood preservice teachers to work with both typically developing children and children with special needs.

In addition to requirements similar to those described above, some states require students wishing to become teachers to complete tests related to academic skills, pedagogical knowledge, or both (Spodek & Saracho, 1990). After completing the teacher education program that has been approved by the state education agency, the student becomes a licensed early childhood teacher.

The Role of Beliefs in Teacher Education

According to Dobson and Dobson, (1983), "there is no such thing as value-neutral action: teaching practices, whether consciously or unconsciously chosen, are an expression of the beliefs held by the person" (p. 20). Several research studies have demonstrated that beliefs are associated with teaching practice (e.g., Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, & Hernandez, 1991; Stipek & Byler, 1997). Current literature regards the relationship between beliefs and practice as interactive (Richardson, 1996). While beliefs are viewed as influencing practice, experiences and reflection on practice can also lead to an alteration of beliefs. In response to this claim, it seems that an understanding and

acknowledgement of the relationship between beliefs and practice as related to teacher education is an important component of any teacher preparation program.

Students begin teacher education programs with strong beliefs and attitudes about what it means to teach (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Hollingsworth, 1989). Calderhead and Robson suggested that such beliefs influence the ways in which students view teacher education and what they learn from their teacher preparation programs. It is possible that students' beliefs upon entrance to the program may lead to a continuation of ineffective or outdated teaching practices (Pajares, 1992). Based on this information, exploring the beliefs that students bring with them to their teacher education program appears to be important for improving their professional preparation and teaching practices.

A goal of teacher education is to help students shape their belief systems into reasonable ideas based on evidence and reason (Green, 1971):

> Teaching has to do, in part at least, with the formation of beliefs, and that means that it has to do not simply with what we shall believe, but with how we shall believe it. Teaching is an activity which has to do, among other things, with the modification and formation of belief systems. (p. 48)

This would, in part, involve helping students become reflective and conscious of their beliefs and how their beliefs influence their actions. The challenge remains in identifying the "practices in teacher education that may serve to nurture and develop in preservice teachers beliefs and attitudes that dispose them to value and use particular skills, strategies, and knowledge" (Renzaglia et al., 1997, p. 360).

Influences on Preservice Teacher Thinking

Prior Beliefs and Personal Experiences

Research suggests that preservice teachers' prior beliefs and experiences play a critical role in the development of their thinking as they prepare to become teachers (Hollingsworth, 1989). Hollingsworth stated that these perspectives serve as filters through which preservice teachers make sense of their training experiences. In some cases, memories of early childhood and previous school experiences may support appropriate learning of teaching practices and in other cases may hinder appropriate learning by overriding training experiences (Jacobs & Eskridge, 1999). Jacobs and Eskridge acknowledged that, based on their own memories of early childhood, teachers can increase their understanding and sensitivity to young children's needs. It is important, however, to recognize that inaccurate recollections or misinterpretations of those experiences can inhibit their understanding and implementation of appropriate work with young children. Nespor (1987) stated that the affective and emotional components of beliefs can impact the manner in which memories are recalled and interpreted. Jacobs and Eskridge offered the following anecdote to illustrate this idea:

> Take the new, well-trained teacher who expressed resentment over the school expectation that teachers prepare lesson plans. Because she fondly remembered the spontaneous classroom of a favorite elementary schoolteacher, she believed that such planning interferes with spontaneity. After discussing her memories of the teacher and the classroom activities that seemed so "spontaneous" she realized that many creative opportunities in the classroom are based on foresight and only look and feel spontaneous because of detailed planning. By clarifying her

memory, this young teacher was able to understand the purpose and importance of lesson planning (p. 65).

Hollingsworth (1989) conducted a study to trace the changes in preservice teachers' preprogram beliefs on how to manage, assess, and instructionally facilitate students' learning. At the onset of this study, 14 preservice teachers were interviewed in an attempt to capture students' philosophies of education, educational experiences, current teaching and managerial practices, role definitions, views of how children learn, and knowledge of reading instruction. Over the course of their nine-month teacher education program, students were interviewed and observed every two weeks in an effort to document change and possible program influences. Students also kept journals in which they recorded changes they had experienced in their thinking.

Based on the analysis of these qualitative data, Hollingsworth (1989) proposed a model of learning to teach in which prior beliefs played an important role. This model demonstrates that preprogram beliefs may interact with both program content and classroom experiences to create varying levels of teaching knowledge. In other words, it is likely that students' unique perspectives on teaching and learning influence their learning in unique ways, making learning to teach a very individualized process.

In a similar study, Calderhead and Robson (1991) followed seven primary student teachers through the first year of their teacher education program. Interviews were conducted during the first few days of the program and then three additional times over the course of the year. The interviews addressed issues such as why they decided to become a teacher, their views of themselves as teachers, their anxieties and expectations, and influences on their thinking about teaching and learning. In addition, students were

asked to write their reactions to videotaped lessons and write scripts for imaginary classroom interactions.

Results of this study demonstrated that at the beginning of their teacher education program, the participants had unique ideas about teaching and their own professional development. Based on these findings, the authors raised several questions concerning the influence of these ideas on the knowledge students acquire in their teacher preparation programs:

> The different conceptions of teaching and of professional development held by students can influence what they find relevant and useful in the course, and how they analyze their own and others' practice. But is sufficient account taken of student teachers' existing knowledge in the process of professional preparation? Are students' existing conceptions challenged and developed? Is interaction between students' knowledge and the curriculum of teacher education encouraged and facilitated in preservice training? (p. 7)

Calderhead and Robson (1991) suggested that teacher educators may use information surrounding student teachers' thinking to design preparation activities that challenge students' existing beliefs and knowledge. They also recommended that future research continue to explore the nature and development of student teachers' thinking in order to further inform the practice of teacher education.

Teacher Education and Professional Experiences

In an article intended to provide an overview of the influence of teacher education on the beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions of preservice special educators, Renzaglia et al. (1997) described and examined the impact of four types of experiences typically found in

a teacher education program: 1) reflective thinking and teaching; 2) program coursework; 3) interactions with faculty; and 4) field experiences and supervision.

Many teacher education programs focus on teaching the skills of reflective thinking and teaching. According to Renzaglia et al. (1997),

> Teachers who reflect on their teaching and continually self-evaluate and refine their practice may be better able to address the dynamic conditions faced in today's public schools. Self-directed professional growth and the ability to think critically regarding one's teaching help to form a solid foundation upon which teachers build technical skills and knowledge throughout their careers. (p. 362)

The authors stated that in order to help students develop skills related to reflection, self-evaluation, and self-directed growth and development, teacher educators need to plan frequent opportunities for students to practice these skills throughout their teacher preparation experience. Understanding that individual students respond in unique ways to a variety of methods, teacher educators may; 1) provide activities that promote reflective thinking such as structured small group discussions; 2) model the types of reflection they hope to foster in their students; and 3) provide ample opportunity for students to engage in reflective writing activities such as critique or journal writing (Renzaglia et al., 1997).

In relation to coursework, Renzaglia et al. (1997) suggested that the course content, delivery, and assessment practices may serve to affect teacher candidates' beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions. Important components related to the content of courses include establishing a sequential curriculum, providing repetition and reiteration of selected topics across a variety of courses and experiences, and providing background

information for students' applied field experiences. Although not a new idea, the authors suggested that experiential learning and active participation in courses are meaningful ways for students to gain information and knowledge. Finally, the authors predicted that evaluation methods relying on applied projects as a demonstration of mastery will likely impact the beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions of preservice teachers.

Kuh (1995) suggested that informal contact and dialogue with faculty members and peers may also have an impact on preservice teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions. This includes discussions and contacts that occur outside of class and are not associated with the evaluation of performance. Often these interactions lead to in-depth personal discussions about topics introduced in class and may influence the thinking of preservice teachers.

Finally, both teacher educators and students claim that one of the most beneficial aspects of a teacher preparation program is the field experience component (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990). While there is no question that these experiences promote the development of students' beliefs and attitudes, Renzaglia et al. (1997) suggested that there are specific aspects of these field experiences that are particularly influential. For example, cooperating teachers who had been trained in supervision were found to provide more feedback to the students participating in their classrooms than were untrained cooperating teachers.

The most predominant model of teacher education places the student in the role of an apprentice (Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). In addition to classroom instruction, preservice teachers learn about curriculum and teaching methods by participating in experienced teachers' classrooms. This opportunity to work alongside experienced

professionals can facilitate preservice teachers' learning of teaching methods and strategies in a way that cannot be equaled through course based instruction (Meade, 1991). According to McDermott et al. (1995), "the integration of theory with classroom practice offers the opportunity to improve new teachers' understanding of themselves, their roles as educators, and their understanding of classroom pedagogy and children" (p. 185).

In an effort to explore the impact of practica experiences, McDermott et al. (1995) conducted a study that examined two groups of elementary preservice teachers' responses to questionnaires about teaching. The two groups, one of undergraduate students and one of graduate students, were very similar in terms of their teacher preparation experiences, except that the graduate student group had no practica experience prior to their student teaching. Thus, due to the similarity of the groups' educational training and program requirements, the authors believed that differences in thinking between the two groups may be a result of dissimilar practica experiences.

To explore this issue, McDermott et al. (1995) collected questionnaire data from 45 graduate and 63 undergraduate teacher education students. Students completed one questionnaire prior to student teaching and a second questionnaire 15 weeks after the completion of their student teaching experiences. The questionnaires contained a combination of closed- and open-ended questions, but for the purpose of this study, only the responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed. When completing the first questionnaire, students responded to the following question: "What is your greatest concern about student teaching?" On the second questionnaire, the open-ended questions

were: "What was your most encouraging moment student teaching?" and " What was your most discouraging moment student teaching?"

According to students' responses to the first open-ended question (greatest concern about student teaching), the two groups had very similar concerns, including concern about their general ability to teach, as well as to plan and implement lessons and manage a group of children. However, when analyzing the responses to the second open-ended question (most encouraging moment), there were differences between the frequency rankings and percentages between the undergraduate and graduate groups. Chi-square comparisons revealed that the two student groups thought differently about the issue of children's learning. The undergraduate students expressed a greater concern about children's learning as compared to the graduate students. In addition, the graduate students were more concerned than undergraduate students about what others thought of their teaching. Finally, the authors thought it interesting that nearly twice as many graduate students than undergraduate students chose not to answer this question at all.

The two student groups also answered the third open-ended question (most discouraging moment) in different ways. For example, undergraduate students spoke more frequently than graduate students about children's learning or lack thereof. Both groups, however, wrote frequently about comments they had received from their cooperating teachers, college supervisors, other teachers, and parents.

Overall, the authors viewed the most important difference as being the progression undergraduate students made from being concerned about their ability to teach and manage a class to thinking about children's learning. In contrast, at the end of student teaching, the graduate student group continued to focus on their concerns

surrounding basic skill issues and classroom management. Based on this finding, McDermott et al. (1995) suggested that practica experiences accelerate preservice teachers movement toward mature thoughts about their work with children.

Preservice Teachers' Beliefs

According to Clark (1988),

> Students begin teacher education programs with their own ideas and beliefs about what it takes to be a successful teacher. These preconceptions are formed from thousands of hours of observation of teachers, good and bad, over the previous fifteen or so years. Undoubtedly, students' conceptions of teaching are incomplete, for they typically see the performance side of classroom teaching. With this in mind, a thoughtful teacher educator might ask: What are the preconceptions about teaching and learning held by our students? How should we take account of what our students know and believe as we help them prepare to be teachers? (p. 7).

Clark (1988) suggested that simply studying the beliefs and dispositions of experienced teachers will not be adequate to guide teacher educators in the right direction when working with prospective teachers. While acknowledging the benefits of studying the beliefs of inservice teachers, he stated that this information is not sufficient to help teacher educators assist preservice teachers to think and act in ways that will lead to becoming a good teacher. Reiff and Cannella (1992) stated that assisting students in developing an awareness of one's personal beliefs will provide prospective teachers with a realistic understanding of how their personal belief system impacts their teaching. Prospective teachers create a unique combination of ideas, beliefs, and experiences that

shape their orientation toward teaching (Jonquiere, 1990). According to Kasten, Wright, and Kasten (1996), for some students this involves applying their insights about their own learning to their ideas surrounding teaching. Other students may need to clarify their personal ideas of what teaching is and resolve the conflict between their previous beliefs and the philosophies of the teacher education program in which they are participating. Lin et al. (1998) stated that

> by encouraging preservice teachers to make explicit their views regarding learning, teacher educators can confront, challenge, or support them during their teacher education. As a result, teacher education programs can have an impact on preservice teachers by helping them be aware of their prior beliefs and challenging their misconceptions about teaching and learning. (p. 26)

Additionally, the study of preservice teacher thinking may offer substantial insight into the impact of teacher education programs and ways in which teacher preparation methods can be improved (McDermott et al. 1995). Hollingsworth (1989) suggested that when preservice teachers' incoming beliefs and preconceptions are taken into account, teacher educators can direct students' educational experiences in a way that may produce desired conceptual change.

Finally, in addition to helping teacher educators better prepare future teachers, Clark (1988) suggested that research surrounding teacher thinking can stimulate exploration into the beliefs of teacher educators themselves. For example, asking questions such as: "What do we as teacher educators believe about teaching and learning, individually and as a faculty?" and "How consistent are our espoused beliefs with our

methods of teaching and evaluation (that is, do we practice what we preach)?" (Clark, p. 7), can help prepare teacher educators for their work with students.

In response to this recent interest in the thinking of preservice teachers, several studies have been conducted exploring various aspects of prospective teachers' beliefs and preconceptions. For example, studies have been conducted to shed light on prospective teachers' multicultural beliefs (Reiff & Cannella, 1992), attitudes and awareness of gifted preschoolers with learning disabilities (Sherwood, 1996), and perspectives on diversity (Ross & Smith, 1992).

Of particular interest to teacher education researchers has been the process of development that preservice teachers experience throughout the course of their teacher preparation program. For example, Reven, Cartwright, and Munday (1997) sought to identify professional growth phases occurring in secondary preservice teachers as they progressed through a field-based teacher education program. Using a multiple-case study design, eight students participated in reflective journaling, interviews, and observations for a period of 15 weeks. During their interviews, students were asked questions such as: 1) Did your views of the teaching profession change over the semester? And if so, how?; 2) What were your major problems or concerns?; and 3) Did you perceive changes within yourselves during your preparation? If so, what were they? While these students seemed to develop in a comparable manner, it must be noted that not all of the participants experienced the same growth changes, nor did they progress through the phases at the same rate; the process was very individualized (Reven et al.). From close examination of the data, the researchers identified six developmental categories of professional growth:

1) Anticipation. In this phase, students tended to romanticize the role of public school teachers and overestimate their own potential to change the world.
2) Adjustment. In this phase, students experienced some disillusionment as they struggled to learn how to become teachers.
3) Redefinition. This occurred as students began creating their own definitions of teachers and teaching.
4) Transformation. In this phase, each student began to broaden his or her perspective of himself or herself as a professional.
5) Commitment. Eventually, students began to develop more accurate views of the duties, responsibilities, and rewards of being a professional educator.
6) Renewed Anticipation. In this final phase, students often fantasized about their future as a teacher. A common comment was, "When I get my class, I'll..."

The authors recommended that in order to provide the best preparation, teacher educators should be aware of the developmental phases of preservice teachers and of the differences between individual students and their unique developmental processes.

While the interest and literature related to the development and beliefs of preservice teachers has increased in recent years, there are few such studies related specifically to the beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers (Bredekamp, 1996; Lin et al., 1998). In a study aimed specifically at exploring early childhood preservice teachers' multicultural beliefs, Reiff and Cannella (1992) explored early childhood teachers' beliefs and feelings of confidence surrounding their work with different multicultural groups. In this study, 64 early childhood education students completed two instruments, one designed to explore their beliefs regarding other cultures and school

practices and the other designed to measure how a person thinks and the person's cognitive complexity or flexibility.

Using these methods, the authors found that students were confident in their capabilities in working with children in a multicultural setting. However, they were less confident in their strategies to handle racial confrontations and reducing prejudices. The authors believed that the results indicated an "idealism and naivete about multicultural education" (Reiff & Cannella, 1992, p.8). The researchers recommended that further research be done in the area of teacher thinking, especially about minority children and their cultures.

In a study designed to assess the impact of teacher education programs on preservice teachers in Taiwan, Lin et al. (1998) explored early childhood preservice teachers' perceptions of their roles as teachers, children's learning, and their relationships with children. The researchers compared 298 students' responses to six open ended questions; 188 of the students responded to the questions after their first year of teacher training and 110 of the students responded to the questions after their third year of the teacher training program and after teaching for one week in a kindergarten classrom. The questions to which students responded were: 1) What will be your most important roles as a teacher?; 2) Imagine that you are in your first teaching job. Describe what will be going on in your classroom.; 3) What are the best ways that children learn?; 4) What are the most important reasons for children to go to school?; 5) What will your pupils need most from you as a teacher?; and 6) What relationships do you expect to have with your pupils? Responses to these questions were coded according to major themes. After the themes were developed, frequencies and descriptive statistics related to the categories

were compared between the two groups. When frequencies between the two groups seemed to be different, chi-square analyses were conducted to determine if the observed differences between the two groups were statistically significant.

Findings of this study revealed that preservice teachers at the beginning and ending of their programs had similar views regarding teaching and learning. However, there were some differences between the beliefs of students in the two groups. For example, beginning students were more likely to view themselves as an authority figure in the classroom, while ending students placed more of an emphasis on equality between themselves and the children. Additionally, while beginning teachers were concerned with their own characteristics as teachers, ending teachers seemed to more concerned with children's initiative and active role in their own learning experiences. In other words, beginning teachers placed responsibility for the children's learning upon themselves, while ending teachers were more likely to place some responsibility for learning upon the children as active, rather than passive, participants in the learning process. Finally, the two groups differed in the emphasis that they placed on children's cognitive ability and knowledge. The beginning group placed a much stronger emphasis on the importance of cognitive ability and knowledge than did the ending group.

The authors suggested that the results of this study indicate that teacher education programs have an impact on the beliefs of preservice teachers by altering their beliefs over the course of their preparation program. They also stated that studies of this nature help teacher educators gain perspective about the strengths and weaknesses of early childhood programs and offer insight into how to structure our teacher education programs.

Methodological Issues in the Exploration of Preservice Teachers' Beliefs

Traditionally, the study of teacher attitudes and beliefs has taken a positivistic approach, with the use of attitude inventories and surveys (Richardson, 1996). However, more recent research reflects a shift toward a naturalistic methodology, with the use of qualitative strategies such as interviews, observations, and reflective journaling becoming more common (e.g., Lin et al., 1998; Ross & Smith, 1992; Zulich, Bean, & Herrick, 1992). Richardson stated that current explorations into the beliefs of teachers find quantitative measures too constraining and have found more success with an inductive approach to the study of this topic. Quantitative instruments exploring teachers' beliefs are limiting because teachers respond to items representing beliefs identified as being important by others, while qualitative approaches allow teachers to identify beliefs which are personally relevant (Munby, 1984). Additionally, the context-specific information afforded by qualitative methodology can enhance the exploration of teacher beliefs. Pajares (1992) commented that "traditional belief inventories provide limited information with which to make inferences, and it is at this step in the measurement process that understanding the context-specific nature of beliefs becomes critical." (p. 327)

In closing, saying that the field of research on teacher education can benefit only from qualitative explorations would be too broad an assumption. Belief inventories and surveys can add to the literature in ways such as identifying discrepancies or issues that merit exploration. In order to make richer and more accurate inferences in the realm of teacher belief research, however, qualitative measures must be included in the exploration of this topic (Pajares, 1992).

Constructivism and Early Childhood Teacher Education

When exploring the development of preservice teachers' beliefs, the constructivist approach to teaching and learning is particularly applicable. Constructivism has its roots in Piaget's theory of how children learn. Piaget believed that young children create or construct their own new understandings or knowledge through the interaction of what they already know and believe and their experiences with their social and physical environment (Abdal-Haqq, 2000; Feeney, Christensen, & Moravcik, 1996; Smith & Cowie, 1991). According to Bufkin and Bryde (1996), these methods of learning are not exclusive to young children. It has become recognized that adults also benefit from an active role in the learning process (Jones, 1986). According to Abdal-Haqq, constructivist approaches are generally credited with producing greater internalization and deeper understanding of information in contrast with more traditional methods that are memory-oriented and employ didactic teaching strategies. Additionally, several authors have emphasized the importance of modeling constructivist approaches for those in preparation to become teachers of young children if they are to be able to employ these strategies in the future (Bufkin & Bryde; Jones; Katz, 1977).

According to Bufkin and Bryde (1996), there are several premises of a constructivist model used in teacher education that parallel the beliefs about how young children learn. These include an emphasis on choicemaking, a curriculum that meets the needs of individual students, the development of critical thinking skills, and the use of active learning activities.

To allow students the opportunity to participate in the selection of course topics and provide input into the choice of methods used to address each topic will likely make

their learning more relevant and meaningful. In addition, it is important to recognize that students develop as teachers at different rates, through a variety of learning styles. Therefore, it would seem beneficial to make an effort to recognize these individual needs and provide experiences that address unique aspects of students' learning (Bufkin & Bryde, 1996).

Because the constructivist approach requires that students problem solve and reflect about their own teaching, many opportunities for critical thinking need to be provided (Bufkin & Bryde, 1996). For example, providing students with information that challenges their ideas and attitudes creates cognitive conflict, helping them construct new beliefs and understandings about the nature of teaching and learning. In order to facilitate this cognitive conflict, teacher educators need to help students become aware of their preconceptions about early childhood education and challenge any misconceptions that become apparent (Hamilton & Hitz, 1996).

Active learning requires that students participate in the process of learning. The instructor's role is that of a facilitator, guide, or co-explorer rather than that of an expert who imparts information to be absorbed by students (Abdal-Haqq, 2000; Bufkin & Bryde, 1996). An important aspect of the active learning approach is the process of reflection. Hamilton and Hitz (1996) cite research stating that the act of reflection can aid students in gaining clarity of thought and a deeper understanding of ideas and problems. Reflective activities include group discussion, keeping a journal and writing concept papers (Bufkin & Bryde; Hamilton & Hitz). Hamilton and Hitz recommended other activities such as cooperative projects, simulations, and group activities to promote active learning in higher education.

One of the challenges faced by early childhood teacher educators is addressing the preconceptions of teaching and learning held by preservice teachers that may interfere with the way students interpret information presented in their teacher preparation programs (Hamilton & Hitz, 1996; Jacobs & Eskridge, 1999). In response to this challenge, Hamilton and Hitz conducted a study to explore the ways that constructivist-oriented instructional methods impacted the knowledge and beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers about teaching.

The setting for this study was an introductory early childhood education course co-taught by a faculty member in early childhood education and a first grade teacher. Using constructivist methods such as group work, journal writing, goal identification, and position papers. the instructors addressed the content of basic early childhood education philosophy, developmentally appropriate practices, classroom management, and parent involvement. In combination with analyzing students' journals and other written assignments. the researchers compared students' responses to The Teacher Beliefs Survey (Charlesworth, et al.. 1993) completed both at the beginning and end of the semester.

Analysis of The Teacher Beliefs Survey, as well as qualitative data indicated that at the end of the semester. students' beliefs regarding teaching and learning had become more developmentally appropriate. Findings also suggested that the occurrence of cognitive conflict (caused by reflective and problem-solving activities) in students' thinking led to the most profound changes in beliefs in the shortest amount of time.

Summary

This review of literature highlights the importance of exploring the beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers. In light of the evidence that students' beliefs influence the ways in which they experience their teacher education program (Calderhead & Robson, 1991), exploring the nature of these beliefs is an important aspect of designing and implementing high quality teacher education programs.

Because there is little research focusing specifically on the beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers (Bredekamp, 1996; Lin et al., 1988), it would seem that further exploration into this topic would make an important contribution to the field of early childhood teacher education. Additionally, since several authors suggest that a constructivist approach can enhance the preparation of early childhood educators (Bufkin & Bryde, 1996; Hamilton & Hitz, 1996), this method should be further explored and tested in the field of early childhood teacher education.

CHAPTER 3. EXPLORING THE BELIEFS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PRESERVICE TEACHERS

A paper to be submitted to Early Childhood Research Quarterly

Angela C. Baum

Abstract

The study of student beliefs can have important implications for teacher education programs. Few studies are available, however, related specifically to the beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers. The current study addresses the following research questions: What are the beliefs of preservice teachers' at different levels in their early childhood education program? What influences the development of these beliefs? To explore these questions, 19 female undergraduate early childhood education preservice teachers participated in five focus groups to discuss their beliefs surrounding several issues in early childhood education (e.g., teacher role, inclusion, parent involvement). Students were divided into three groups based on the courses they had completed: Beginner (sophomore and junior courses), Intermediate (senior courses), and Advanced (student teaching). Additionally, six of the 19 students participated in individual interviews. Using grounded theory analysis procedures described by Strauss and Corbin (1990), data analysis resulted in five themes: 1) Children's Learning and Development; 2) Working with Groups of Children; 3) Relationships; 4) Inclusion; and 5) Professional Issues in Early Childhood Education. Implications are discussed in relation to teacher education programs and directions for future research.

Introduction

According to Dobson and Dobson, (1983), "there is no such thing as value-neutral action; teaching practices, whether consciously or unconsciously chosen, are an expression of the beliefs held by the person" (p. 20). Several research studies have demonstrated that beliefs are associated with teaching practice (e.g., Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, & Hernandez, 1991; Stipek & Byler, 1997). Current literature regards the relationship between beliefs and practice as interactive (Richardson, 1996). While beliefs are viewed as influencing practice, experiences and reflection on practice can also lead to an alteration of beliefs. In response to this claim, it seems that an understanding and acknowledgement of the relationship between beliefs and practice as related to teacher education is an important component of any teacher preparation program.

Students begin teacher education programs with strong beliefs and attitudes about what it means to teach (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Hollingsworth, 1989). Calderhead and Robson suggested that such beliefs influence the ways in which students view teacher education and what they learn from their teacher preparation programs. Jacobs and Eskridge (1999) acknowledged that, based on their own memories of early childhood, teachers can increase their understanding and sensitivity to young children's needs. It is important, however, to recognize that inaccurate recollections or misinterpretations of those experiences can inhibit their understanding and implementation of appropriate work with young children. It is possible that students' beliefs upon entrance to the program may lead to a continuation of ineffective or outdated teaching practices (Pajares, 1992). Based on this information, exploring the beliefs that

students bring with them to their teacher education program appears to be important for improving their professional preparation and teaching practices.

In addition to the role that prior beliefs and experiences play in the development of early childhood preservice teachers' beliefs systems, several studies have explored the impact of teacher education programs on students' thinking (McDermott et al., 1995; Renzaglia et al., 1997). Such studies find that course content, delivery, and assessment practices may serve to influence teacher candidates' beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions (Renzaglia et al). In addition, both teacher educators and students claim that one of the most beneficial aspects of a teacher preparation program is the field experience component (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990). While there is no question that these experiences promote the development of students' beliefs and attitudes, Renzaglia et al. suggested that there are specific aspects of these field experiences that are particularly influential. For example, cooperating teachers who had been trained in supervision were found to provide more feedback to the students participating in their classrooms than did untrained cooperating teachers.

The study of preservice teacher thinking may offer substantial insight into the impact of teacher education programs and ways in which teacher preparation methods can be improved (McDermott et al. 1995). Hollingsworth (1989) suggested that when preservice teachers' beliefs and preconceptions are taken into account. teacher educators can direct students' educational experiences in a way that may produce desired conceptual change.

Finally, in addition to helping teacher educators better prepare future teachers, Clark (1988) suggested that research surrounding teacher thinking can stimulate

exploration into the beliefs of teacher educators themselves. For example, asking questions such as: "What do we as teacher educators believe about teaching and learning, individually and as a faculty?" and "How consistent are our espoused beliefs with our methods of teaching and evaluation (that is, do we practice what we preach)?" (Clark, p. 7), can help prepare teacher educators for their work with students.

In response to this interest in the thinking of preservice teachers, several studies have been conducted exploring various aspects of prospective teachers' beliefs and preconceptions (e.g., Reven et al., 1997; Ross & Smith, 1992; Tamir, 1991). While the literature base related to the development and beliefs of preservice teachers has increased in recent years, there are few such studies related specifically to the beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers (Bredekamp, 1996; Lin et al., 1998).

In response to this need, the current study employed qualitative methods to address the following research questions: What are the beliefs of preservice teachers' at different levels in their early childhood education program? What influences the development of these beliefs? To explore these questions, 19 female undergraduate early childhood education majors participated in five focus groups and six of these students also participated in individual interviews. Students were encouraged to discuss their beliefs surrounding several issues in early childhood education (e.g., teacher role, inclusion, parent involvement).

METHOD

Design

To explore students' perceptions, qualitative research methods were employed in accordance with the naturalistic paradigm. Rather than looking for relationships of cause

and effect, qualitative methods allow for a greater understanding of human relationships and the interconnectedness between factors, events, and process (Stainback & Stainback, 1984). Qualitative methods are appropriate for the exploration of the current research questions because they allow greater understanding of the personal perceptions of early childhood education preservice teachers and uncover the intricate details that are difficult to convey with quantitative methods. According to Patton (1980), qualitative inquiry addresses truth as primarily a matter of perspective and then focuses on developing a thorough understanding of issues and phenomena within specific contexts rather than developing generalizations that are enduring, context-free truths. Relying on an inductive method of data analysis will allow anticipated and unanticipated variables to be identified that interact and better describe the natural setting in which student growth occurs.

The grounded theory approach, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998), was employed to develop a theoretical framework consisting of statements of relationship emerging from the data. These statements of relationship explain who, what, when, where, why, how, and with what consequences an event occurs. Strauss and Corbin stated that "grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action" (p.12). The grounded theorist begins with a homogeneous sample, collecting primarily interview data that provide a basis for the development of theoretical propositions or hypotheses (Creswell, 1998). In a grounded theory design, data collection, analysis, and development of a theoretical framework are closely related (Strauss & Corbin). Analysis begins with data collection; new data are compared to emerging themes and data collection continues until saturation occurs, in which no new information emerges during

coding activities (Strauss & Corbin). Throughout this process, hypotheses are developed and refined based on new information and insight received from data collection.

The goal of the current study is to offer insight and understanding into the beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers at different levels of their program. In addition, the current study will shed light on the multiple influences that impact the development of these students' perceptions.

Participants

Participants for this study were identified using a theoretical sampling strategy. In a grounded theory design, this means that the researcher chooses participants who can contribute to the evolution of the theory (Creswell, 1998). For this purpose, a homogeneous sample of individuals was identified (e.g., students majoring in early childhood education at Iowa State University). Based on the recommendations of Brotherson and Goldstein (1992), participants were chosen not only because of their experience as a student of early childhood education, but because they represented characteristics identified as important selection criteria. This process and the selection criteria identified as important to the goals of this study are described in the following section.

Upon approval from the Iowa State University Human Subjects Review Committee (Appendix A), a list of all early childhood education majors at Iowa State University was purchased from the Registrar's Office. A letter was sent to each student on the list (N=168) describing the research project and requesting their participation (Appendix B). Students interested in participating returned a short selection questionnaire containing information about themselves, their experience working in early

childhood settings, and their education at Iowa State University (e.g., Did you begin college immediately following high school? Have you been admitted to the teacher education licensure program?) (Appendix C). Additionally, students returning the questionnaire were asked to identify times they would be available to participate in a focus group. Seventeen students responded to this request through the mail. Due to the low number of responses, the researcher then contacted the professors of courses required for early childhood education majors and requested permission to visit their classes to recruit additional participants for this study. This resulted in an additional 61 students for a total of 76 students agreeing to participate in the study.

After receiving all of the selection questionnaires, students were assigned to one of four groups based on courses completed within the early childhood program:

- Group 1 (N=36) consisted of students who were beginners in the early childhood program. These students had completed or were enrolled in 200 level courses such as HD FS (Human Development and Family Studies) 220, HD FS 221, El Ed (Elementary Education) 245/El Ed 268 (see Appendix D for course descriptions).
- Group 2 (N=17) consisted of students who, in addition to the above courses, had completed or were enrolled in 300 level courses such as HD FS 340, HD FS 343, HD FS 345, and El Ed 367/ El Ed 468F.
- Group 3 (N=18) consisted of students who, in addition to the above courses, had completed or were enrolled in 400 level courses such as HD FS 455, HD FS 456, El Ed 433, El Ed 438/El Ed 468G, and El Ed 439/ El Ed 468I.
- Group 4 (N=7) consisted of students who had completed all of the above courses and were enrolled in their student teaching experience.

After dividing the students into four groups and in order to contribute to the homogeneity of the groups, students were eliminated from the pool if they had children of their own or were not eligible for admission into the Teacher Education Program. To further promote homogeneity, students were chosen to participate based on the similarity of their responses to items on the selection questionnaire (i.e., amount of experience working with young children). The researcher attempted to choose students with similar experiences working with young children to aid in eliminating these experiences as a factor that could explain the development of their belief systems.

The practice of creating groups consisting of particular categories of participants is often called "segmentation" (Morgan, 1996). Morgan states that this segmentation offers two advantages: 1) it allows for a comparative dimension in the research project, and 2) it facilitates discussion by making participants similar to each other. To increase the number of students in Group 1, the researcher contacted additional students who had completed the selection questionnaire, resulting in the scheduling of a second focus group with four students agreeing to participate. When the focus group was conducted, two students participated. This resulted in a total sample size of four for Group 1. After preliminary data analysis, Groups 1 and 2 were combined based on the similarity of their responses and overall consistency between the ideas of the two groups. The combination of Groups 1 and 2 was labeled as the Beginner Group (N=7), while Group 3 was labeled as the Intermediate Group (N=7) and Group 4 was labeled as the Advanced Group (N=5). Table 1 describes the number of students asked to participate in a focus group, those that agreed to participate in a focus group, and finally those that participated in a focus group.

Table 1: Sample Sizes

Group	Asked to participate in focus group	Agreed to participate in focus group	Participated in focus group
Group 1a (Beginner Group)	10	6	2
Group 1b (Beginner Group)	6	4	2
Group 2 (Beginner Group)	12	6	3
Group 3 (Intermediate Group)	11	7	7
Group 4 (Advanced Group)	9	6	5

The final sample included 19 white female undergraduate early childhood education preservice teachers at Iowa State University with a mean age of 21.3 years. Seventeen of these students had begun college immediately following high school, with 15 of them beginning at Iowa State University. Eighteen students had previous experience babysitting, 12 had been assistant teachers in a preschool or daycare, four had been a head teacher at a preschool or daycare, and three had experience working as an assistant in an elementary classroom. Fourteen had been admitted into the Teacher Education Program at Iowa State and the remaining five had not yet been admitted, but were eligible for admission (Appendices E-H).

Researcher as an Instrument

As the researcher in this study, I served as the key research instrument. Guba (1981) recommended that the researcher explicitly state his or her experiences and biases

that have influenced not only the choice of topic, but the questions explored in the study and the ways in which the data are interpreted and presented. In this section, I will describe my past experiences as a student, an early childhood educator, and an early childhood teacher educator, as these experiences provide a context in which the data are interpreted (Creswell, 1994).

My personal experiences have had a strong influence on my interest in early childhood teacher preparation and development. I received an undergraduate degree in child and family development in a program with a curriculum similar to the early childhood education program at Iowa State University. It was during this time that I began to work with young children and build an interest in what would lead to a graduate degree in early childhood education. During this time, gained hands-on experience working with young children through field experiences at the campus child development center and employment at a local day care center. Through this undergraduate education, I developed a strong knowledge base in child development and learned how to design, implement, and assess appropriate programming for young children.

Immediately following the completion of my undergraduate degree, I entered graduate school in the area of early childhood education. My development as an early childhood educator continued as I began to integrate theory and practice. One of the most meaningful experiences I had in graduate school was the opportunity to be a head teacher at the Iowa State University Child Development Laboratory School. During this time, I was not only able to continue to refine my skills as an early childhood teacher, but also gain new experiences, such as working in an inclusive setting. Additionally, teaching in the laboratory school allowed me the opportunity to supervise several

undergraduate practicum students and student teachers placed in my classroom, thus sparking my interest in early childhood teacher preparation. Through this experience of supervising university students, I began to become aware of the needs of early childhood education majors through not only observation of their work with young children, but by listening to their reflections on their experiences in my classroom.

Finally, I moved from teaching young children to teaching undergraduate courses in child development, guidance, and curriculum. In addition to teaching course content, I believe that an important part of my role was to relay the importance of working with young children and preparing students to be able to share this importance with the community. Working with students in this context contributed to my interest in the development of early childhood preservice teachers' beliefs concerning the field of early childhood education and how these beliefs impact how we, as teacher educators, prepare students to be teachers of young children.

Setting

Participants in this study were Early Childhood Education majors at Iowa State University. This major is jointly administered by the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education and the Department of Human Development and Family Studies in the College of Family and Consumer Sciences. In addition to general education courses, early childhood education students complete courses in child and family development, preprimary and primary curricula, assessment, programming, and teaching strategies and methods (Appendix I). The courses are designed to prepare students for work with typically developing children and those diagnosed with special needs. Several courses include a laboratory component consisting of 2-4 hours per week

in an early childhood education program. After completing the first 60 credits of the early childhood education curriculum, students must be admitted to the Teacher Education Program requiring a cumulative Iowa State grade point average of 2.5 and an ACT composite score of 19. Students who do not have an ACT score of 19 may take the Pre-professional Skills Test (PPST) and gain admission into the program by receiving minimum scores in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics (172, 172, and 170 respectively). During their final semester at Iowa State University, students participate in a student teaching experience consisting of one eight-week placement in a preschool setting and one eight-week placement in a primary (kindergarten through third grade) classroom. One of these two placements must be an inclusive setting that serves both children with and without special needs. At the completion of their degree program students have completed approximately 250 hours of early childhood field experience. Graduates of this program are eligible for an Iowa teaching license for pre-kindergarten through third grade, including children with and without special needs.

Data Collection Procedures

In order to gather information surrounding preservice teachers' perceptions, a combination of focus groups and individual interviews was used. Researchers often choose to employ both individual and group interview techniques because they combine the greater depth afforded by individual interviews with the greater breadth of group interviews (Morgan, 1996). In the current study, focus groups were conducted first, followed by individual interviews with two students from each group (Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced). According to Morgan, this strategy is beneficial because it

allows the researcher to first identify a range of perspectives and experiences, and then to gather further information, adding more depth where needed.

Focus Groups

As discussed previously, participants were chosen to participate in a focus group based on their responses to the selection questionnaire (Appendix C). In an attempt to ensure students' attendance, telephone calls were made to each participant the day prior to the meeting. Dinner was served to compensate students for their time.

Upon arrival, students were asked to wear nametags and sign a consent form outlining the goals and procedures of the focus group and guaranteeing the confidentiality of their identities (Appendix J). Prior to the focus group, students were allowed to eat dinner and socialize with other members.

Each focus group lasted approximately 1 to 1 ½ hours. Students were seated around a table with nametags identifying each person. This allowed students to call each other by name or be called upon by the researcher. After a brief introduction and a description of the meeting to be held, the discussion began with each student describing her experiences working with children. During this meeting, the researcher's role was to guide the discussion. To do this, the researcher used a guide containing questions to discuss throughout the meeting (e.g., What do you believe is the teacher's role in early childhood education? What do you think is difficult about working with young children?) (Appendix K). Guides were slightly different for each focus group based on the characteristics of the group. For example, students in the Advanced Group were asked to reflect on their beliefs and changes that may have occurred from when they first decided to major in early childhood education. Questions of this nature would not have

been appropriate for the Beginner Group as many of these students had only recently made the decision to major in early childhood education. Prior to conducting each focus group, the guides were reviewed and altered based on the responses of previous groups. An assistant moderator, a graduate students trained in focus group methodology, was in attendance at each meeting to take notes, handle the environmental conditions, and respond to unexpected interruptions. Each session was audio taped and video taped and then transcribed by the researcher and two undergraduate research assistants.

Individual Interviews

Following the completion of each focus group, several students were asked to participate in an individual interview. Students were chosen based on their ability to contribute insightful information in an individual interview format. Questions for the individual interviews were developed based on the information discussed in the focus groups. The interview questions were designed to clarify and expand on topics discussed in the focus groups, as well as to explore any new topics of interest that arose from the focus group discussion (e.g., Describe the relationship you want to have with the children with whom you work. What skills do you believe teachers need to have to be successful working in an inclusive setting?) (Appendix L). Interviews were conducted until saturation was accomplished meaning that no further insight was gained from the addition of new data (Creswell. 1998). Six individual interviews were conducted, two from each group (Beginning, Intermediate and Advanced).

Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), one of the main questions to be considered by qualitative researchers is: "How can an inquirer persuade his or her

audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?" (p. 290). Researchers agree that there are certain indicators of rigor that are consistent with the paradigmatic assumptions underlying qualitative research. Qualitative researchers address these indicators by establishing the "trustworthiness" of a study and make several recommendations to ensure that a study is credible and useful (Guba, 1981). This section will describe accepted criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries and how they are addressed in the current study.

Credibility

One issue of importance for any researcher is ensuring that his or her findings are plausible or have a high "truth value." According to Guba (1981), naturalists address this issue of truth value through establishing the credibility of their study. In this study, the methods of peer debriefing, triangulation, and member checks were employed to address issues of credibility. According to Guba, a peer debriefing component in this study required the researcher to interact with other professionals, such as members of the dissertation committee, to address questions as they arose throughout the research process. In addition, peer debriefing was accomplished through employing three other individuals to review portions of the data and verify the researcher's interpretations. Two of these individuals were graduate students trained in qualitative methodology and the third individual was an early childhood educator. In a meeting with these three individuals, each member described the themes that they believed were apparent from their review of the transcripts and the members worked until there was agreement upon the content and grouping of the themes and sub-themes.

Similarly, member checks were conducted which, according to Guba (1981), "goes to the heart of the credibility criterion" (p. 85). In doing member checks, a summary of themes and interpretations was mailed to each of the individual interview participants in order to confirm the accuracy of their meanings. The participants were asked to return the letter if they had any disagreements or additions to the summaries. When no participants replied, the researcher called each one and they all expressed agreement with the summaries.

The third method used to improve the probability that findings of the current study will be found credible is that of triangulation. There are four different methods of triangulation that researchers may use, including the use of multiple and different data sources, methods, investigators, and theories (Denzin, 1978). This study employed the use of triangulation through conducting focus groups and interviews with several different participants. According to Diesing (1972), this allows for contextual validation, which is to "evaluate a source of evidence by collecting other kinds of evidence about the source...to locate the characteristic pattern of distortion in a source" (pp. 147-148). In addition, triangulation was accomplished through employing the three previously described individuals to review and verify the researcher's interpretations.

Transferability

Due to the belief that nearly all social/behavioral phenomena are context bound, naturalists do not believe it is possible to generalize their findings across populations (Guba, 1981). Instead, the researcher attempts to provide a thick description that will enable the reader to make the decision as to whether the findings may be applied successfully to a similar setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A thick description of the

context of the current study was developed by thoroughly describing the undergraduate early childhood education program at Iowa State University. In addition, information was collected regarding the educational background of the participants, as well as the amount of experience they had working with young children. This allows the researcher, as well as the reader, to make decisions as to how these issues may influence the findings. Another way the issue of transferability was addressed was through the use of purposive sampling. The goal of this method of sampling is to choose participants who share commonalities and have a lot of information surrounding the topic of interest, as well as a breadth and depth of related experience (Patton, 1980). Using this technique, "participants are included based upon specific criteria identified by the researchers as most relevant to the research questions" (Brotherson, 1994, p. 109). This will increase the likelihood that the findings of this study will be applicable to similar groups of people in similar settings or contexts.

Dependability

The researcher attempts to ensure dependability in order to determine the likelihood that the findings of an inquiry would be repeated if the study were replicated with similar participants in a similar context (Guba, 1981). To address the issue of dependability, the researcher established an audit trail and arranged for a dependability audit. This entailed keeping a written account of steps taken during the research process, including interview transcripts, decisions made during the course of the study, and personal reflections of feelings and interpretations. Additionally, an auditor was employed to examine the procedures used in this study to confirm that they fall within the realm of generally accepted practice. The auditor, a graduate student trained in

qualitative methodology, also examined the researcher's interpretations to ensure that they can be justified from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability

Establishing confirmability serves to ensure the neutrality of the findings. In other words, "the degree to which the findings of an inquiry are a function solely of subjects (respondents) and conditions of the inquiry and not of the biases, motivations, interests, perspectives, and so on of the inquirer" (Guba, 1981, p. 80). The previously described audit will contribute to the confirmability of this study. The auditor reviewed the findings to ensure that they were grounded in the data and that inferences made were logical. In addition, the auditor paid close attention to the appropriateness of category labels, quality of interpretations, and the possibility of alternative explanations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An attempt was also made to ensure confirmability through the use of triangulation and describing the personal biases and experiences of the researcher in the final report, a technique identified by Guba (1981) as practicing reflexivity. By using these methods to establish the trustworthiness of this study, the goal is to allow the reader to develop confidence in the findings.

Data Analysis

Analysis in grounded theory is systematic and involves three major types of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the open coding phase of analysis, the researcher groups common ideas into categories. In the second phase, axial coding, relationships between categories and ideas are identified. Finally, in the selective coding phase, the researcher attempts to explain these

relationships to the reader. This section will describe this process and its use in the current study.

Open Coding

The open coding phase of this study began with close examination of the data through the reading and rereading of the transcripts in order to identify concepts that emerged during the interview process. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), a concept is a representation of an event, object, or action that is identified as being significant within the data. The purpose of this step is to allow the researcher to group concepts that share common characteristics or related meanings under a common name or classification. The next step was to group the identified concepts under a broader, higher order concept called a category. Grouping concepts into categories allows the researcher to reduce the number of units with which he or she is working and depict the problems, issues, concerns, and matters that are important to the individuals being studied (Strauss & Corbin).

Axial Coding

Once an initial set of categories was developed, connections were made between the categories and their sub-categories, in a process known as axial coding. According to Strauss (1987) axial coding involves several basic tasks: 1) continuing the process of identifying properties of categories and sub-categories; this task was begun during open coding; 2) identifying the various conditions, actions, and consequences related to a phenomenon; 3) relating categories to their sub-categories through statements which describe the relationship; and 4) looking for cues in the data which may describe how major categories might be related to each other. In sum, "when analysts code axially,

they look for answers to questions such as why or how come, where, when, how, and with what results, and in so doing they uncover relationships among categories" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 127). These relationships are called conditions. Several conditions may emerge during this stage of analysis. For example, the researcher may recognize important aspects of the context in which it is embedded, strategies which may be used to address the phenomenon, conditions that may intervene with these strategies, and the consequences of those strategies. This coding phase aids in forming hypotheses and propositions for theory development.

Selective coding.

The final coding step, selective coding, is the process of integrating and refining the categories. During this process, the researcher brings the information back together and writes a narrative about the connection between the results and the research question. This involves identifying the core categories/phenomena, explaining the relationship between the core categories and sub-categories, and validating those relationships against the data. Finally, the researcher refines and/or further develops categories if needed. It is important to note that the above coding steps need not occur only in a linear fashion. Strauss and Corbin (1990) state that, through the research process, the researcher moves back and forth between each of the steps, at times conducting them simultaneously.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Upon the previously described coding of the data, five major themes emerged from the analysis of student responses:

1) Children's Learning and Development
2) Working with Groups of Children

3) Relationships

4) Inclusion

5) Professional Issues in Early Childhood Education

This section will describe participants' beliefs surrounding each of these topics. When the three groups (Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced) spoke of an issue in a similar way, quotes have been included that clearly represent students' viewpoints. When the three groups described differing perceptions on a topic, a quote from each group have been included to demonstrate the range of opinions.

Children's Learning and Development.

In relation to their views surrounding children's learning and development, participants discussed three main topics: 1) Characteristics of children as learners; 2) What young children should learn; and 3) How young children learn.

Children as Learners

Participants in the three groups had similar responses concerning the characteristics of young children as learners. A common topic of discussion among participants was their belief that young children are internally motivated to learn. Several participants talked about the joy they get from watching children "absorb" information and discover things independently. Participants commented frequently on children's love for exploration and their natural curiosity.

> They ask questions. They ask questions about your life. They want to find out about the world. They are just curious and they like to have fun. They like to just do things. They want to try this and experiment to see what happens if we do this. And they're constantly doing things and trying new things. Most children have that, you know, motivation inside them that they want to know what is out there and want to look for things and solve that puzzle by themselves. (Advanced Focus Group; 92899)

Another belief common across the three groups was that children have a wide range of abilities and that early childhood teachers need to be aware of these differences to promote children's individual development. They believe that teaching young children is difficult because of their individual differences and because children change so quickly in their early childhood years.

> I think that it's hard and difficult for me that there's all sorts of levels of abilities at this age. Not to say that once they get older there's not, but now a child who is two years old may know all of his colors and alphabet and some of them don't know anything. It's difficult for me that it's like that--the range of abilities. (Intermediate Focus Group; 101099)

Many participants were also concerned that adults may underestimate young children's ability and capacity to learn.

> I think, also, if you don't underestimate little kids. They have so much potential and I think a lot of people that don't work with kids underestimate them. (Intermediate Focus Group; 101099)

> I think they have a lot more potential than a lot of adults give them credit for. And I think that if teachers keep challenging them, keep pushing them to be (inaudible) they'll learn a lot more. Also [the children] think that they can do more. They'll say "Wow! I did this!" (Intermediate Focus Group; 101099)

Finally, several participants discussed the importance of a child's early years and how experiences in early childhood education can have a lasting impact on a child's learning.

> Well, I think it's the foundation for their whole lives. At this age, children are learning so much and we influence, you know, what they learn and what they take with them for the rest of their lives through high school and college. Everything they do is dependent on these first few years. (Beginner Focus Group; 101099)

> And plus, in the early years, they're going to set their mode in whether they're going to like school or not going to like school. You know, it's

> probably going to affect how later in life they're going to feel about school. (Beginner Focus Group; 101099)

What Children Should Learn

When describing the content they believe young children should learn through their early childhood experiences, members of all three groups described the importance of helping young children develop a love and enthusiasm for learning.

> I think that's what's really important. Is that it's up to you to give them—if they're going to like school or if they're not going to like school. If you're able to be enthusiastic and love books and love learning and you can carry that over into the child, then I think it goes with them the further along that they go. (Intermediate Focus Group; 101099)

In addition, many participants mentioned that through their early childhood experiences, children gain the skills and strategies needed to become lifelong learners.

> At that stage they're starting to learn how to learn. You're teaching them learning strategies and how to get the most out of activities by asking questions and being involved. I think that's important for the later years. (Beginner Focus Group; 101099)

Participants also agreed that more emphasis should be placed on social and emotional skills such as interacting with others, becoming independent, and developing self-esteem than on academic content such as math and science. This is similar to the findings of Cassidy and Lawrence (2000) who found that teachers placed more emphasis on socio-emotional development than other developmental domains. The following quotations illustrate this belief.

> I think I agree with what Jill said, that it's a foundation and they come up with a sense of who they are and their self-esteem in these early ages and that affects your whole life. I think as ECE educators that's just an important thing in itself right there—to establish their self-esteem and help them see a value system and just to stimulate them like that. More so even maybe than stimulating their cognitive development, it's more getting them to feel good about themselves and establishing a proper self-esteem. (Beginner Focus Group; 101099)

> But I think the big one that stands out is just the relationships between peers and how to act around adults and things like that. Because those skills are going to transfer over into school. (Advanced Interview; 121599)

> I think seeing kids going from a skill that you teach them to being able to do it on their own. The big thing for me is, like, teaching a child the social skills they need and then seeing a child initiate those on their own. You know, when a friend gets hurt you model, "You can ask them, are you ok? You can do this and that." and then seeing them do that on their own without your assistance anymore is a big thing for me. Just going from you helping to being independent is really what I like to see, I guess. (Advanced Focus Group; 92899)

> Trying to teach them about feelings, I guess. I would say academics in some sense, but I would say more when they get older. I don't think that through the developmental stages of, like, birth through three or four years old that it's totally necessary that you have to be teaching them every single academic skill necessary. I mean, I know a lot of parents are like, "Well, she doesn't know her ABC's yet, she doesn't know her colors yet." But I think more, like, just real life skills that they need to know, you know? They're more important than the academic things at that age. I mean, how to get along with people. (Intermediate Interview; 5900)

Participants were also concerned that children learn an acceptance of and sensitivity to differences through their early childhood experiences.

> It would be important to me to have an environment in our classroom where everyone is accepting of each other. You know that there is a lot of diversity. There's different colors in the room, but it's not supposed to affect us. That's a lot...It's very important as a teacher right now. Especially to society—to teach acceptance to them. And hopefully, I can do that in the future. (Beginner Focus Group; 101099)

Several participants also shared the belief that it may be necessary to teach children a variety of basic skills such as dressing themselves and eating independently.

> I guess probably just various things like toilet training, eating habits. I guess just like learning how to use utensils and stuff like that because I think with those two things, sometimes depending on their family life, they might not get at home. (Intermediate Interview; 5900)

An interesting difference between the three groups was that only the Advanced Group spoke of the importance of identifying family priorities when designing experiences for young children, which had been identified by Katz (1991) as an important criteria for determining what young children should learn.

> And parent expectations, I think that has to guide a little bit. Because there are certain things that parents want their kids to learn that can easily be worked into the curriculum and I think that's important because parents often know what their children need to learn and what their children want to learn. I think you can learn a lot from them. (Advanced Interview; 121599)

Even though this group of students described the importance of recognizing family priorities, it is interesting that students placed such little emphasis on the areas of language development, motor development, and cognitive development. According to Cassidy and Lawrence (2000), this lack of emphasis, in spite of the fact that these areas are often deemed important by parents and administrators, may indicate that students are unaware of or not as concerned about these areas of development. It is possible that students perceive a less didactic approach to teaching these skills and concepts as meaning that the teaching of such content is not important. For example, early childhood teacher education programs typically favor naturalistic methods such as providing a print-rich environment to teach letter recognition to preschoolers. Perhaps students interpret this as meaning that letter recognition is a skill that is not necessary to address until the child is older. Teacher educators need to approach this topic with care, monitoring students' interpretation of specific teaching methods.

How Children Learn

When describing the ways that young children learn best, students' responses in the current study are similar those of students in a study conducted by Lin et al. (1998). The students in the Lin et al. study believed that "learning is best where students have opportunities for self-discovery, where the atmosphere in the room is non-threatening, and where the teacher considers individual differences at the same time" (p. 12). Participants in the current study frequently spoke of allowing children to explore their environment and giving them hands-on experiences.

> You know hands-on experiences for children are one of the best ways that they learn. Because I know when I grew up I didn't have that. We sat in the classroom and the teacher talked to you and you didn't have a lot of chance to get up and move around. And working especially in the child care setting where you see that happening so much and you know that they are learning so much more than if you just sat down and lectured them all day. (Beginner Focus Group; 101099)

> Letting them actually touch and hands-on experience—because that way they'll remember it. It gives them an experience to tie knowledge to and they're more likely to remember it if they can remember that experience. (Intermediate Focus Group; 101099)

Participants also discussed the importance of providing fun and interesting experiences for children. They emphasized the fact that children learn through play, describing experiences such as drill and practice activities, lecturing, and worksheets as inappropriate for young children.

> And you know, like I said, learning at this age shouldn't be like, "Ok. We're going to sit at a desk and we're going to do this worksheet." You know? It should be incorporated into an activity that they can relate to. Like, do it about Pokemon. Incorporate Pokemon or something that catches their attention and that is fun and interesting to them and they will learn it. (Beginner Focus Group; 4400)

> I think they learn well by discovering it for themselves, not sitting up there

> telling them, "This is the color red." Like drilling them all of the time. Just like any daily interaction. Talking about different things with them, colors, their name, social skills. Making it a way that's fun for them. Having a little place where they can explore. Having, like, a science station or something they can explore with, like leaves or give them the kind of nature that they can feel free to do it on their own. (Advanced Focus Group; 92899)

Each of the three groups also talked about the importance of modeling as a teaching strategy when working with young children. Participants stated that children learn well by watching others, including both adults and other children.

> I think kids also learn by teaching each other. Because a lot of times if you just show one child a concept, and maybe partly because they are imitating you, but also they're really willing to help another child if you give them that opportunity. When a child raises their hand or asks for help, just saying, "Why don't you ask some of your friends if they can help you?" Other kids will try and teach them, too. So by their peers, also. (Beginner Focus Group;101799)

Another common idea among the members of three groups was that showing an interest in the children and an enthusiasm for teaching can have an impact on how children learn.

> You can show an interest in them. A kid can tell if you like your job. I mean, you can all think back to a teacher that you know didn't love their job. You have great teachers and kids know that. If a kid knows that you want to be there and you're excited about teaching, that helps them learn, I think. (Advanced Focus Group; 92899)

When examining participants' responses concerning how young children learn, there was one important difference between the groups. While the Beginner Group seemed to have an overall awareness of children's differing abilities, they did not speak of ways that teachers can facilitate the learning of individual children. They offered strategies for making learning fun and interesting for the group as a whole, while the

Intermediate and Advanced Groups talked about using their knowledge of children's unique interests and abilities to enhance the individual child's learning.

> You can help them by being tuned into each one individually, like giving them the tools that they need to learn on their own. Each kid is different. Some kids will get one thing, some kids will get something else. (Advanced Focus Group; 92899)

> I think it's important to find out what they're interested in. If they're not interested, then they're not going to learn. I know the things that I remember learning as a child are the things I was interested in—the rest was out the window. If it didn't interest me, then I didn't care. (Advanced Focus Group; 92899)

> I think providing lots of different experiences—because all children learn in different ways and so that way, if you have lots of experiences you're sure to find something that they all enjoy and can benefit from. (Intermediate Focus Group; 101099)

Additionally, the Intermediate and Advanced Groups believed that children learn best when the information is not only presented in a fun and interesting manner, but is also relevant and meaningful to them as individuals. Katz (1991) agreed with this idea, stating that experiences that will extend, deepen, and improve children's understandings of their own environments and experiences are worth emphasizing.

> I think part of it is things that are relevant to them, too. Like, teach them about Iowa, teach about things they can go and see. Teach about farming...they're not old enough to conceptualize certain things that aren't within where they can see it. So teach about things around them. (Intermediate Focus Group; 101099)

> I think children learn when they see different areas of education throughout the real world and how it's applied in real life situations. Like, yeah, 2+2=4, but let's see that in a real situation. Let's use that and I think that's how they learn—if you can make it meaningful to them so they can see how it is used in a situation. I think that's how they learn. See how it can be useful to them. (Advanced Focus Group; 92899)

Working with Groups of Children

When discussing their work with groups of young children, participants talked about three main topics: 1) Classroom guidance and discipline; 2) Curriculum and planning; and 3) Characteristics of a good early childhood teacher.

Classroom Guidance and Discipline

An issue that participants in all three groups spoke of frequently was guidance and discipline, which has been cited by Hollingsworth (1989) as one of beginning teachers' biggest concerns. When given the opportunity to describe changes in their beliefs surrounding early childhood education, participants in all three groups described substantial changes in their views toward guidance and discipline.

> I've babysat for years and years, but even when I do go back and babysit some of the kids now, I notice a difference in the way I do use guidance with them and things. I don't know, 'cause when I first started working with kids and babysitting and stuff, more of it came from what I was used to from my parents and things. And now my classes have kind of changed it. Just because—it's hard to explain—I just learned a lot more techniques and how to better treat kids and how to respect them more, I think. (Beginner Interview; 11400)

> I think my dealing with discipline has changed the most. 'Cause when I first came in and I was working with kids before I was just kind of like, "Ooh, don't hit!" or something like that. You never realized how much went into disciplining kids and how little people know about the whole subject of discipline. (Intermediate Focus Group; 101099)

> Classroom management has gotten a lot better and I feel like, before I didn't know what to do and so I would rather just ignore it than do something about it. And now, I find myself, I never back down. Never even think about backing down. (Advanced Interview: 121599)

Even though participants in each group described an overall change in their beliefs toward guidance and discipline, they described the strategies that they use to

handle guidance situations in very different ways. For example, the Beginner Group talked primarily about the importance of speaking to young children in a positive way.

> A lot more feedback and just being more positive in it. I remember one thing I learned in one class was not to say "no" so much, maybe "stop" instead and I think that's really neat. It just sounds a lot less negative and kids react a lot better to it. (Beginner Interview; 11400)

The Intermediate and Advanced Groups, however, described specific strategies such as redirection and providing children with clear expectations for their behavior.

> Having clear expectations, just to begin with. And have them help establish the rules that can't be broken and you just have to be firm and consistent, also, I think. Doing that, you can establish a lot of respect and that'll help a lot, I think. (Intermediate Focus Group; 101099)

In addition, the Advanced Group described ways to prevent conflict situations from occurring in the classroom, as well as the importance of implementing strategies that best meet the unique needs of individual children.

> Now that we know the kids and, like, I know when something's about to happen—you can stop it. But before then I wouldn't have picked up on all the clues. (Advanced Focus Group; 92899)

Not surprisingly, one of the most obvious differences between the three groups was participants' level of confidence when handling guidance situations. While all three groups expressed the opinion that handling guidance and discipline was challenging, analysis shows that as they have more training and experience, participants feel more equipped to handle such situations.

> ...but discipline—I'm hoping I won't have to do much of that. That's something I don't like. (Beginner Focus Group; 101799)

> I think that's one of the big things that has changed, is my dealing with discipline. Before I was very avoidant. I don't like confrontation and I'm a very non-confrontational person and that was always the hardest thing for me to do. I never knew what to do in those situations and now I feel a little

> bit more equipped to deal with discipline situations. (Intermediate Focus Group; 101099)

> You know, if somebody's completely doing something they're not supposed to, it's usually those really tough situations where a four-year-old is kicking and screaming and trying to bite and all that. That would have made me run the other direction a long time ago. And now, I don't even think twice. It's like it's become an automatic thing. Which I never thought would happen. Never, ever, ever...And now, it's just becoming second nature, which is nice. I mean, I still do a lot of reflecting and a lot of asking other teachers, but I never thought it would feel so natural after awhile. So that's nice—that's a big confidence booster when you start feeling that way. (Advanced Interview; 121599)

Curriculum and Planning

Participants in the three groups approached the issue of curriculum and planning in very different ways. The Beginner Group spoke frequently about planning activities that were appropriate for the children's developmental level. They believe that an awareness of children's developmental needs simplifies the process of selecting and implementing appropriate activities. They also described a goal for themselves as being able to use their creativity to design "neat" activities for children. Several of these beginning participants described their ideal classroom and how they would include activities covering a wide variety of curricular areas, such as math, science, literacy, and art.

> I think it will be cool. I know a lot about a lot of different things, like science and art and math. I'm good with computers and I play some music. It will be cool to just—I want instruments in my classroom. I want a lot of art supplies. I want a lot of computer stuff. I want technology in there so that the kids can learn and just play and explore and do all sorts of different things. (Beginner Focus Group; 101799)

In addition, participants in the Beginner Group talked of the importance of the environment in promoting children's learning:

> I think the environment in general. The teachers should have a warm, inviting feeling so that the environment is very warm and the kids feel secure. And I also think the materials used should be at their level and so they can operate it, so they wouldn't have so much adult interaction. Some things they can do by themselves. (Beginner Focus Group; 101099)

Participants in the Intermediate Group seem to be confident about their ability to choose appropriate activities, but realize that it is more difficult and time consuming than they once expected.

> And you're always looking...I feel like I'm the teacher already because I'm always looking for books or looking for ways to get across to them experiences that kids could have. It's like I want to shut my brain down and say "Stop!", but I can't do that. (Intermediate Focus Group; 101099)

In addition, participants in the Intermediate Group talked about the challenge of designing the curriculum to meet the needs of individual children.

> I think I realize more that every child is different and that every child learns differently where when I started, making a lesson plan wouldn't have been such a big deal because I would just make a lesson plan and all of the kids would do it. Where now I realize that you would have to make some adaptations for the children so that every one of them can do it and be successful with it. (Intermediate Interview; 5900)

While the Intermediate Group spoke briefly about planning for individual children within the group, the Advanced Group seemed to talk solely about this issue and the challenges that they faced when confronted with this task. Participants in the Intermediate Group were mostly concerned with choosing activities that could be easily adapted to meet the needs of each child, while the Advanced Group expressed a greater concern about the actual implementation of these activities.

> Adapting one large group activity for each child. What is going to be effective for each child? How can I engage all of them? How can I get each one to participate? Or you have to think of all of their interests and all of their abilities. I have no idea. (Advanced Focus Group; 92899)

> Who should I be targeting? I'm just thinking I didn't realize there's so much planning...you definitely need to set goals, objectives for your kids at the very beginning and follow through. (Advanced Focus Group; 92899)

Related to the issue of curriculum and planning, it was interesting that students in the Intermediate Group seemed more confident about their abilities than did students in the Advanced Group. One explanation for this is that while participating in their student teaching experiences, students in the Advanced Group have had the opportunity to become aware of the realities of planning for a diverse group of children. They have also been able to identify their areas of perceived personal weakness and, therefore, are questioning their abilities in this area. The students in the Intermediate Group, however, are armed with information and feels ready to implement their skills in any setting.

Characteristics of a Good Early Childhood Teacher

Throughout the focus groups and interviews, participants offered insight into what they believe makes a good early childhood teacher. They expressed these beliefs not only through speaking about teachers that they had observed, but also by identifying goals that they have for themselves as they become early childhood teachers. The three groups held similar beliefs surrounding this topic. They believe that a good teacher possesses characteristics such as a love for teaching, flexibility, patience, compassion, and organization.

> She totally enjoys her job, like, she loves it. And she's not overbearing. She lets kids be creative and experiment with things for themselves... (Beginner Focus Group; 4400)

> Enthusiasm and spontaneous. Being able to go with the flow. You have to convey that you're caring and love them, but you need to—you have to be the kind of person they'll respect also. (Intermediate Focus Group; 101099)

> Organized, creative—or if they're not, then using other resources to spark that. Flexible, open-minded, time efficient, energetic, caring, sensitive, to be able to set limits, intuitive to what is going on around them, thinking about their needs. (Advance Focus Group; 92899)

These findings are similar to those of Lin et al. (1998) who found that students believed that personal characteristics such as patience and love are important contributions of good teachers.

Participants also believed that it is important for an early childhood teacher to be able to work well with others and be open-mined to various opinions and cultures that they will encounter.

> I think that's a benefit. You know, just having more experience with and being open-minded about different cultures and different kinds of things. (Beginner Focus Group; 4400)

> Good listener both to kids and parents and your colleagues. (Advanced Focus Group; 92899)

Students' emphasis on characteristics promoting positive interpersonal relationships is consistent with past research related to students' descriptions of "good teachers." A study by Weinstein (1989) found that preservice teachers tend to de-emphasize the academic aspects of teaching. The study demonstrated that early childhood/elementary education students stressed social and affective variables such as patience, concern, and enthusiasm as important characteristics of good teachers. Weinstein suggested that while these characteristics are desirable, "conceptions of teaching that omit cognitive concerns are incomplete and tend to diminish the importance of pedagogical and subject matter knowledge" (p. 59). She recommended that teacher

educators explore ways in which the skills, understandings, and cognitive capacities necessary for effective teaching can best be relayed to students.

Relationships

Participants in the three groups described their thoughts concerning the relationships that they would develop in an early childhood setting, including: 1) Relationships with children; and 2) Relationships with families.

Relationships with Children

When describing the relationships that they would like to have with the children with whom they will be working, most participants stated that they envision a loving and caring relationship. They described themselves as being a "nurturer", giving hugs when needed and offering frequent praise. They also described the importance of being someone that the children could trust, as well as providing an environment where children can feel safe.

> Another thing, which I hope this wouldn't be happening, but for some kids who are coming from a rough home or something, maybe school could be a place they know they are going to be safe. That someone's caring about them. They know a teacher cares about them. They have friends there. They can enjoy themselves without having to be worried that something terrible will happen to them. A safe environment for them to hopefully grow. (Advanced Focus Group; 92899)

Participants also believe teachers should support children when they try new things and guide them in their learning experiences.

> I would say somebody to support and guide them. You need to kind of give them some freedom, but head them in the direction that... I mean, they want to learn, but you need to give them those opportunities and provide the encouragement for them to do so. (Intermediate Focus Group; 101099)

Additionally, participants believe that early childhood educators are role models for young children, both in and out of the classroom.

> I think role modeling in today's society is a very big portion of what we do. Some of them don't have a stable environment except for school. We talk about being a positive role model, someone who's excited about learning, excited about being there with them, to kind of make them think, "Oh yeah. Somebody does care about learning and I can be like them." (Intermediate Focus Group; 101099)

> And then along with how children watch your every move, you have to always be a role model even when you are part of the community. Because kids notice if you attend little league or support them and I don't think it's a very good role model for teachers to have other extra curricular activities that the kids could find out about. I think you always have to be a role model at all times, even when you don't realize that you are being watched. (Beginner Focus Group; 101799)

Participants also expressed concern that early childhood teachers are frequently called upon to fulfill the role of a parent by meeting their basic needs and providing the love, attention, and stability that some children may not receive at home.

> I think one thing that has come up that I've just seen and have had teachers tell me...a lot of things like hygiene issues and just maybe not having a parent there as much as they need them. One teacher told me, "As much as you don't want to be, you're going to have to be their parent a little bit because they need something stable." (Intermediate Focus Group; 101099)

> A lot of times kids just don't have role models, really. I mean, they don't have parents that want to read to them or help them with their school work and things. So I think it's important to help them with that kind of stuff at school if you know they're not getting it at home. Which might be hard. Sometimes you hear of cases where kids aren't getting their basic needs met, like not getting breakfast before they come to school or their parents send them with a can of pop and it's really sad. Some schools do have programs for breakfast, otherwise I don't know what you could do to help that. (Beginner Interview; 11400)

While participants accept the fact that this is sometimes a crucial aspect of their role as an early childhood teacher, many of them expressed anxiety about managing the added responsibility.

> It's that whole "I'm human" attitude that you've got to get going because sometimes you think you've got to be able to be their mom and their dad and their teacher and their friend and their role model and sometimes it's hard to be all of those things at once. And you've got to realize your limitations. (Intermediate Focus Group; 101099)

One aspect of the relationship with the children that differed for each group was the way that they desired the children to view them, whether as a friend or as an authority figure. The Beginner Group seemed most concerned that the children like them and like coming to their classroom.

> I just think about how I remember my elementary teachers and I always thought, you know, I liked them and stuff. I can't remember ever having a bad experience with them and I think that's neat. That's what I want with my kids. I don't want them to ever not like coming to my classroom or anything. (Beginner Interview; 11400)

The Intermediate Group continued to talk about the children liking them and being the children's friend, but they also wanted to be sure that the children viewed them as the person in charge and show respect for them as a disciplinarian.

> I want it to be a friendly—I know it can't be probably as tight as I want it to be. But I want it to be friendly, you know, they feel like that can come up and talk to me. But, yet, keep the respect distance. (Intermediate Interview; 12000)

> I guess just probably a loving, caring relationship. I mean, I want to, work with them and not totally be an authoritative over them, but at the same time I would be able to discipline...(Intermediate Interview; 5900)

The Advanced Group described a loving and caring relationship, but thought it was important that the children viewed them as a leader rather than a friend.

> ...as far as the relationship should be—I feel like they should be able to look at you as someone in authority and not just another friend because I've seen a lot of beginning teachers who try too hard to get the kids to like them and it causes them a lot of trouble in the long run. But I also feel like, the kids have to like you, too. So I feel like as a teacher, the first thing I like to do is establish the role of being in control and I feel like you can always back off on that I work with individual children enough that they know I care about them and I'm willing to be there for them. (Advanced Interview; 121599)

The Advanced Groups' emphasis on fulfilling the role of an authority figure is similar to the findings of Lin et al. (1998) who found that ending-level early childhood education students emphasized classroom control more than beginning-level students.

Finally, when describing the relationship that they would like to have with the children with whom they work, the Advanced Group spoke of defining the relationship differently for each individual child. They believe that each child has different needs and therefore requires a relationship with the teacher that addresses those individual needs.

> As far as my relationship individually with the kids, I feel like it's somewhat on a need basis. Some kids need more attention from the teachers than others. And I think that certain kids will get a little bit more of my attention. (Advanced Interview; 121599)

Relationships with Families

Participants spoke frequently about the relationship they expect or desire to have with the families with whom they work. For example, all three groups described the importance of open communication with families. They used words such as ongoing, honest, frequent, and comfortable when addressing the topic of communicating with parents. They stressed the fact that in order for communication to be successful, parents must trust the teacher and feel welcome in the classroom. They also described

communication strategies such as newsletters, phone calls, and parent-teacher conferences.

> ...I think that letters home to the parents, an open door policy in the classroom where they can come and visit anytime they want and not just on special days...I think even having the children invite their parents. I know I'll see them at parent-teacher conferences and that, to me, that's a time where you kind of get to know the parents more and you tell the parent about their child and they can tell you things that they've noticed about their child, too. ...That's what I want to do, keep it open. (Intermediate Interview, 12600)

> Honesty is the best policy. You have to be up front with parents. There are sometimes when I have really been afraid to talk to parents about something. But I found that honesty is the best policy. It's just up front and you tell them in a way that you know it's not going to offend them. Parents like to know. (Advanced Focus Group, 92899)

Participants in the three groups also described the early childhood teacher as needing to support differences in families and understand how those differences impact their work with children. They described families from diverse cultural or socio-economic backgrounds as having a variety of different needs. They believe that an understanding of "where the family is coming from" will not only enhance the child's education, but strengthen their relationship with the family.

> The first thing is that you need to be supportive of that family. The children aren't in our care so that we can change them. They come from that family first of all. You need to be in constant contact with that family to know what's going on which could be causing problems in our care...certain characteristics like, do they eat meat? Can they have milk? Just keeping in constant contact. To know what is going on in that child's life or where they come from. (Beginner Focus Group, 101099)

> Just understanding where the family is coming from. I think it's easy to make snap judgments like, "They didn't do this and blah, blah, blah." And really, a lot of families face things that we have no idea what's going on. And just to take that into consideration before you get frustrated and try to understand that. (Advanced Interview, 121599)

Isenberg and Brown (1997) stated that it is important for early childhood teachers to have an understanding of the realities that children bring with them to early childhood settings. Students in the current study demonstrated an understanding of this concept, recognizing that the child's home life can sometimes help explain the child's developmental progress and behavior at school.

> Like kids coming from all different cultural backgrounds and economic backgrounds. More and more divorced families and all different kinds of family settings, whether it's grandma and grandpa or, you know, even an older brother or sister or just a mom or just a dad. The families are different and understanding each child and...you have to be very observant and understand, like, "Ok. Well this girl is in a single mom family and so this is why she is doing this." You kind of have to understand their, I don't know, reasoning for this and why they may act certain ways. (Beginner Focus Group; 4400)

A difference between the three groups emerged from the descriptions of the nature or quality of the relationships they envision having with families. The Beginner Group expects that their relationship with parents will be extremely challenging. They spoke frequently of the need to avoid and resolve conflict, cope with critical and judgmental parents, and work with parents who are harming their children.

> ...make parents feel needed and they won't be as judgmental. I think that if they feel really comfortable with the teacher and they know the teacher on a more personal level they tend to trust the teacher more. ...Because a lot of parents, like, their attitude toward teachers is because they've had a bad experience with the teacher in the past, when they were growing up. So they don't really view the teacher that highly or that positively... (Beginner Focus Group, 4400)

> I think it's also hard when parents think their child is, like, the angel of the world and yet the child is beating up all the other kids on the playground. (Beginner Focus Group, 101799)

> It is going to be a big challenge just to talk to the parents at a level where they understand where you are coming from and you know where they're coming from. And instead of getting into the yelling match or whatever.

> Keep your cool, I guess, and just try to work it out. (Beginner Focus Group, 101099)
>
> It's so hard. Or watching [the children] be hurt or not feeling like you can do anything about it. Abusive households and things like that. Or parents that are mean or parents who aren't giving them discipline. I feel like that's harmful to a child. (Beginner Focus Group, 101799)

Participants in the Intermediate and Advanced Groups placed less emphasis on the potential conflict that they may have with parents than did the Beginner Group. While they do believe that there may be instances in which they would be required to meet a child's unmet needs, they are also concerned about respecting the parents' rights and boundaries. The following conversation illustrates this concern.

> ...you see those kids like we've been talking about—not very often. but if they don't have parents at home who are supportive, they only get forty hours a week of supportive adult role models and to not have that at home is really sad and it scares me.
>
> I think that it's really unfortunate, but I also think that if we don't deal with it, we can't go on. Those basic needs have to be met first before you can be successful teaching them anything else.
>
> Yet you don't want to overstep your boundaries.
>
> You don't want to have a parent coming in and saying, "You are parenting my child!" It's hard—where do you stop? It's a fine line. (Intermediate Focus Group. 101099)

Differences between participants' beliefs regarding the parents' role in their child's education also emerged. While all three groups spoke of parents as valuable resources, the ways in which they described parents as resources differed widely. The Beginner Group spoke of the importance of parents being involved in the classroom. but mainly from the perspective of assisting the teacher. For example, these students spoke of having parents volunteer in the classroom and chaperone field trips.

> Even have them as a resource. Like if you're going to do a project, have parents volunteer to help out or make the materials or donate the materials for the project. Use them as a resource and make the parents feel like they're needed...(Beginner Focus Group, 4400)

One Beginner student did mention that parents can share experiences with the class, but mainly because it is fun for the children.

> Also, viewing them as valuable resources, there are parents out there who are doctors and nurses and factory workers and who are postal carriers. Kids love to hear about that stuff, you can have a parent come in and talk or you could even have a parent set up something...(Beginner Focus Group, 101799)

In addition to parent involvement in the classroom, the Intermediate and Advanced Groups view parents as a resource in that they can provide helpful information about their own child. They realize that parents can offer information from a perspective different than that of the teacher and that this information can help the teacher plan experiences for the children in their group.

> I think the parents might sometimes be able to tell you about their child, too, because they see them in a different way than the teacher does. (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

> And parent expectations—I think that that has to guide a little bit. Because there are certain things that parents want their kids to learn that can easily be worked into the curriculum. And I think that's important because parents often know what their children need to learn and what their children want to learn. I think that you can learn a lot from them. (Advanced Interview, 121599)

According to Isenberg and Brown (1997), successful teachers try to accept the views of parents as potential sources of important information. Parents can provide important information regarding their children's relationships, interests, and experiences outside of school that enhances the teacher's understanding of the children and contributes to more effective teaching (Becher, 1986).

An important difference between the Beginner Group and the Intermediate and Advanced Groups was the belief that the early childhood teacher can serve not only the children, but the entire family. While the Beginner Group focused on ways in which the parents could benefit the classroom, the Intermediate and Advanced Groups spoke of ways that they could serve as resources for the parents. For example, the Intermediate Group spoke frequently of the role of the teacher as parent educator. They believe that the teacher may sometimes be able to educate parents about curriculum and classroom proceedings, as well as topics such as guidance and discipline, toilet training, and bedtime. These students were also able to offer strategies in which to share this information with parents.

> I think a good way to educate parents on little things like toilet training, I guess, and biting—I know these things come up in centers a lot—would be maybe finding articles that relate to those issues that they agree with and posting them or even making copies and giving them out to all the parents. I think that that way it's not coming from the center itself—it's coming from professionals that have actually researched things. Maybe even having parent night, you know, once a month or something and having parents come in and talking to them about the curriculum and what you are going to be teaching [their children] so that they see that the kids are actually learning something, too. (Intermediate Interview, 5900)

The Advanced Group suggested that, at times, parent education happens in a more indirect manner such as modeling appropriate behavior for parents or helping parents discover answers for themselves. They went a step further to state that although teachers may not always know the answer, they can help parents find out solutions to their problems.

> If they have questions, help them meet their needs or find ways. A parent yesterday was asking about different ways of guidance for her child at home because she's the only child and she said she doesn't have the experience. She doesn't know what to do with her. So acting as a

> resource person and if you don't know the answer, then finding that out for them or helping them find some way. (Advanced Focus Group, 92899)

Inclusion

Another theme that emerged from participants' responses was that of inclusion. All three groups spoke about 1) their beliefs and philosophies of inclusion and 2) practice and implementation in inclusive classrooms. Much of this discussion was in the form of highlighting skills, dispositions, and understandings needed to make the practice of inclusion successful.

Beliefs and Philosophies of Inclusion

When asked to describe their beliefs about the practice of inclusion, participants in the Beginner Group struggled with the concept of inclusion and questioned it as best practice for young children. Students seemed to be aware of the fact that early childhood education programs are moving toward an inclusive approach, but were not convinced that inclusive programming can be successful. They spoke of concerns they had about children who were "too challenging" and that teachers would not be able to spend enough time with individual children if they were working in an inclusive setting.

> I'm not a big fan of inclusive education. I really am not. And it just seems that with inclusive education there is not enough staffing to help all the kids and there are not enough teachers. (Beginner Focus Group, 101799)

> I have a little mixed emotions about that and I feel bad...but, I think that for a child that does have special needs it's wonderful for them to be in a classroom with all of these kids that have full capability and I think they can learn a lot. I think it's good for them to be in an environment where they're thought of as just like the next kid. And I also think it's good for the other children to accept those differences and help them and you can really watch how kind children are to kids who do need extra help and that's wonderful. But I think you have to be careful because sometimes that child does have special needs and they do need extra help

> than the other kids and when you start taking time away from some of the other kids, that's when I think it starts to become a problem. (Beginner Focus Group, 101799)

As the above comment illustrates, even though students have heard and are able to repeat rationale behind an inclusive approach, this information has not been sufficient to convince them of the benefits of inclusive practice. Students even seemed to express a feeling of guilt when expressing their hesitancy toward inclusive practice.

Students in the Beginner Group also stated that while working with children with special needs can be rewarding, it can also be painful and frustrating.

> It's rewarding, but it costs a lot of your heart, I think. I mean, you've got kids that make so much progress and then you've got kids who don't make any progress at all. It's rewarding, but it's really painful. (Beginner Focus Group, 101799)

> I think it probably would be very rewarding like Sharon was saying—that would be a lot of accomplishment to watch happen. But I do think that it would be really hard to have them in a regular classroom setting all the time. Maybe even for just a few hours a day would be just a little bit better for everyone. (Beginner Focus Group, 101799)

Participants in the Intermediate Group seemed more supportive of inclusion if it is implemented in the appropriate way. For example, they stated that if the parents believe that an inclusive setting is the best place for their child, then their wishes should be respected. When participants in this group expressed any amount of hesitancy, it was more likely to be related to their own skill and comfort level, but not to inclusion as a practice.

> My beliefs are if the situation is right and appropriate, then the student can be in a classroom that has inclusion and that's good. But I think it takes the right teacher. Even though I have the degree, it still kind of scares me. But I think that it's possible if you have support. But I think it can work and I think it's a good thing because all children need to learn together and you can learn so much from each other. (Intermediate Interview, 12000)

> I believe that inclusion is a good thing for children. Both the children with disabilities and the typically developing children learn so much from each other in those type of settings. So I believe that the parents have the decision where to put the child, if that's the best place. Because some children just would not function correctly in an inclusive classroom. So I think the parents need to make the decision where the best place to put their child is. (Intermediate Interview, 12600)

In addition, participants in the Intermediate Group agreed that working in inclusive settings could be challenging, but that the benefits outweighed any struggles they may experience.

> The benefits outweigh all the work that you have to do. This child is going to benefit from it and being in this profession, that's what you want. You want the children to benefit from the things we do. (Intermediate Interview, 12600)

The Advanced Group was also in support of inclusive education, but were able to more effectively articulate their reasons for this belief. They described times they had experienced successful inclusion and observed the benefits for all children, with and without special needs.

> I guess I would be considered for [inclusion]. I've seen it be successful in so many different situations and there aren't very many times that I haven't seen it work. And I haven't been watching for very long, but I've had good examples. I think that kids need role models and I think a regular classroom provides that for all kids. (Advanced Interview, 121599)

> I saw how the other children learned from the children with special needs and also learned together with them. They form a class, they form a group. And a lot of, especially the younger kids, they don't really see them as different. They are just a member of the class. I think if we as teachers model that, just treat them like a regular student, which they are, the children will follow that model. And it's very important for students as well as the parents because I believe a lot of the parents want their children to be regarded as just a member of the class. (Advanced Interview, 12000)

> If you keep responding in the same caring way, I think [typically developing children] will grow up to be more sensitive and more caring and aware of accepting people for who they are. (Advanced Interview, 12000)

In a study exploring early childhood teachers' beliefs and practices surrounding inclusion, Lieber et al. (1998) also found that teachers believed that typically developing children learn to accept differences in inclusive settings. They also believed that typically developing children would learn empathy, tolerance, and compassion from participating in an inclusive program.

An interesting commonality between the Intermediate and Advanced Groups was the way their beliefs had changed about working in inclusive settings. Many students stated that when they first decided to major in early childhood education, they were not accepting of the concept of inclusion. Several students stated, however, that their beliefs about inclusion and working with children with special needs had been altered significantly over the course of their early childhood program. For example, many participants in the Intermediate and Advanced Groups described themselves as developing a more realistic view of the likelihood that they would work with children with special needs at some point during their teaching career.

> I guess I'm seeing that it's not really a choice we have. It's the way society is. Classrooms are changing. There are more kids with special needs in the classrooms and it's not going to be a choice if I don't want that child in my room or something. You have to be accepting and ready to try to teach that child. (Intermediate Interview, 12600)

> Well. I don't know if I was just ignorant or not aware or I just thought, "Well, I'll just go through [the unified curriculum] and just find a job in a first grade classroom." And now I know that you're not going to have any classroom without any child who doesn't have even attention deficit or some mild need. (Advanced Interview, 12000)

The above comment illustrates that participants believe early in their program that even though their degree prepares them to work with children with and without special needs, they would simply choose to work in settings serving only typically developing

children. Students often claimed that if they would have known that they would have likely been working in an inclusive setting, they would have put more of an effort into understanding the content area related to children with special needs when it was presented to them.

> And then the more I got into the special ed. classes, it was like, "Oh. We did learn about this. I probably should have studied a little bit more for it". (Intermediate Interview, 12600)

> Well, I remember taking Special Ed 250 and was just, like, "I don't like this class." I didn't. I think it was more that I didn't like it because I didn't realize how much I was going to use the information. (Intermediate Interview, 12600)

> I think that if I would have been given a little more information maybe I wouldn't have been so closed minded about the whole thing at first. (Advanced Interview, 12000)

> Well, when I first went into early childhood education, I went into it only for early childhood education. I didn't want anything to do with special ed or the inclusion part of it, but as I went on it wasn't a choice. (Advanced Interview, 121599)

When asked to talk about reasons why they thought they had a difficult time accepting the concept of inclusive education, students' stated that their opinions were often based on their previous experiences with children with special needs and that they had not been exposed to inclusive programming in their own schooling experiences.

> You have to forget all the things you ever heard. What you have in your mind is totally different. We've had how many years of, "Who are these people?" and not knowing these people and then all of sudden we're supposed to be like, "Hey! That's ok." (Intermediate Interview, 12000)

> I think my beliefs about inclusion have changed because I didn't really know much about special education. When I was in school there were a few kids and they went to a resource room and I don't really remember them coming back. (Intermediate Interview, 12000)

Practice and Implementation in Inclusive Programs

Participants in each of the three groups talked about their beliefs surrounding the actual work teachers do in inclusive settings. One of the common topics that emerged was that of working with parents in inclusive settings. As described previously, students discussed the relationship that they would like to have with the parents they will be working with. Many students believed that these relationships would have unique characteristics in the context of an inclusive setting. The Beginner Group continued to describe their expectation of frequent conflict with parents and they believed that working with parents of children with special needs may require more personal contact than working with parents of typically developing children.

> I think [the relationship with parents] would probably be more extensive. I think that you will probably develop more of a personal relationship with those parents because you will be communicating with them more regularly and more often. I guess maybe some issues would be—there could be a conflict or a disagreement on what they think. If you think that their child is not progressing enough and something needs to be done differently or they need to be held back or something. That is a decision that parents might not like. They might disagree and you would have to debate about things to make everyone happy and do what's best for the child. You would have to pay attention and document everything so that you could argue your position. So, again, it takes more effort and more time and more work. (Beginner Focus Group, 4400)

While the Intermediate and Advanced Groups spoke less than participants in the Beginner Group about potential conflicts they may experience with parents, all three groups expected sharing information with the parents of children with special needs may be difficult at times.

> Sometimes parents don't want to accept the truth. If they don't want to accept it, they don't want to work with you about it either. And they just kind of want to ignore the problem and that could be really difficult. (Beginner Interview, I1400)

> Parents could be a challenge, I think. Because sometimes you have to give

> information to parents that they don't want to hear. (Advanced Interview, 121599)

Similar to the previously described findings surrounding the relationship with parents, the Intermediate and Advanced Groups also spoke of parents as providing important information about their child's disability.

> ...and asking the parents. Just getting an overall feel for what that child needs and what the child can do. And focus a lot on what he or she can or cannot do and then work on those things that the parents want them to accomplish by the end of their schooling or whatever. (Intermediate Interview, 12600)

> And especially, talk to the parents about the kids with disabilities because the parents have dealt with this disability since the child was born in most cases. And they know so much about these little things, like, "Oh, this little kids likes this doll and if he gets upset you need to give him this." It could take you forever to figure that out on your own. (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

In addition, participants in the Intermediate and Advanced Group stated that they may face challenges when working with the parents of typically developing children in an inclusive program. They emphasized the importance of educating these parents and helping them understand the learning and interactions that occur in an inclusive setting.

> ...talking to the other children's parents. They might not want their child in there because of simple things, like that their child won't get as much attention or we'll have to lower the curriculum. A lot of times, parents just don't understand everything about inclusion. They just know there's going to be a child with disabilities in the classroom. That's all they're told. And so contacting those parents, probably by letter, and explaining to them what's going to be going on or even having a date where all the parents can get together and voice some of their concerns and we could talk more about what they want to do. So I think that's another big challenge. (Intermediate interview, 12600)

> I think parents maybe of typical children may question the validity of doing a particular activity or may even object to some things. (Advanced Interview, 12000)

In addition to talking about working more closely with parents, participants in all three groups described strategies that could be implemented to ensure the success of all

children in inclusive settings. For example, participants spoke of the importance of ensuring all children work together in the classroom. The Beginner and Intermediate Groups spoke of this strategy in general terms, stating that "everyone learns from each other."

> And by providing opportunities for the kids to work together in class—that may encourage them to work together out on the playground or after school. If they are just provided chances to interact. (Beginner Focus Group, 101099)

> I think other students can be of help as a strategy for both children. They can learn from each other, you know, from a buddy or someone that needs help with getting their coat on. (Intermediate Interview, 12000)

Students in the Advanced Group also described peer mediated strategies, but were able to offer more clear explanations of how to implement these strategies.

> I think you need to, first of all, get to know the children. Which actually doesn't take as long as I thought it would—to get to know each of your individual children. And there are some that are going to be immediately drawn to the children with special needs. They are more compassionate or just try to include them more often. So we use those children to engage a child [with special needs] in an activity or to use their communication system or to participate in group. Use the children who are interested and work well with the other kids. (Advanced Interview, 12000)

> I've also taken two children who are pretty, not solitary players, more parallel players, and engaged them in the same activity. Limit the supplies or put them in, if they have the same interests, put them together and encourage them to create something together. (Advanced Interview, 12000)

Similarly, members of all three groups talked of the need to adapt and modify activities for children with special needs. The Beginner Group, while recognizing this as an important component of inclusive programming, expressed distress about this practice.

> I know that for one of my classes I have to write lesson plans out and for some of them we had to modify them so specifically. [The instructor] will make up a child with a particular special need and you have to modify it to fit that child. So it just kind of adds more work to it, you know? You are going to constantly have to be thinking of that and adapting certain parts of it for different children. You

> might not be able to do the lesson plan the same way. You might have to break it up into groups or say, "Ok. This part of the class do it this way." Or address that specific child and be, like, "Ok. For you, do it this way." I don't know if that would make them feel more isolated or not. (Beginner Focus Group, 4400)

This above comment may offer insight into the reasons that participants in the Beginner Group were hesitant about accepting inclusion as a practice. Even though they realize that adaptation is necessary to allow children with special needs to be successful in the classroom, they may not have an accurate understanding of how this strategy should be implemented. It is not surprising that students are hesitant to accept the idea of adapting lesson plans for children with special needs if it means isolating them from the rest of the children in the class. Providing beginning students with examples of successful inclusion strategies and ways to implement these strategies may help students develop more accurate perceptions of the process of inclusion.

Students in the Intermediate and Advanced Groups also recognized adapting the curriculum to meet children's individual needs as being a challenge, but they expressed a more positive opinion about this process.

> I think it would be a challenge, too, just being able to work with each child individually. Coming up with lessons that fit all their needs is a challenge. It will get done, but it's hard. (Intermediate Interview, 5900)

> Each [child] is just so different. They each need something different. And you have to keep that in mind all the time. I go to bed and I'm thinking what I can do tomorrow to get through to this child and I have a pad and pen sitting on my nightstand. "Ok. This kid loves Barney. How can I incorporate Barney?" You're always thinking. (Advanced Focus Group, 92899)

In addition to adaptation and modification, participants described other strategies to be implemented in inclusive settings. The Beginner Group spoke mainly of accepting all children, regardless of their needs, and including them in all classroom activities.

> I think the biggest thing is making sure they are included in everything that you do. Planning activities that they can participate in. Having them work in cooperative groups. (Beginner Focus Group, 101099)

The Intermediate and Advanced Groups spoke more specifically than the Beginner Group, however, offering several suggestions for facilitating inclusion and adapting activities. These strategies included the use of visual communication strategies, arranging the classroom in ways allowing children with disabilities to have access to all activities and move easily about the room, and taking advantage of "the teachable moment." According to Jones and Rapport (1997), these strategies are valuable to the success of including young children.

> Well, I would say some strategies would be some adaptations. Like with autistic children you would need to use strategies like picture charts. Like having cards that say "yes" or "no". Having the children hold those up. That's a strategy you can use. (Intermediate Interview, 5900)

> Noticing that a child is, I don't know how to describe this, but a child is using a particular skill and adapting to that quickly and making it a game or making it fun. You've just got to be quick on your feet. (Advanced Interview, 12000)

Students in these two groups also spoke about the importance of helping the typically developing children understand the needs of other children and making them feel comfortable interacting with them. Many students also described the importance of modeling an attitude of acceptance of children with special needs in the classroom, which several authors (e.g., Bricker, 1995; Chipman, 1997) have described as critical to the success of inclusive programming.

> I think we need to educate, at least a little bit, the other students, too. Because they're going to question, especially if there's, like, a wheelchair or something very noticeable. They're going to ask questions about it and if you don't ever talk about it, it makes it weirder. (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

> The teacher has a lot to do with it. If the teacher is accepting and doesn't make a

> big deal. If the child has a disability and she treats him like every other child there then the students in the classroom are going to feel the same way. That, yes, technically he has a special need. He's not special in the classroom because he is just like everyone else, but only with some kind of disability. So I think the teacher has a lot to do with how the children accept him or her in the classroom. And then not to make him or her stand out. If the child has to go to another special room during math time, don't make a big deal out of it. Just let it go. (Intermediate Interview, 5900)

The above comments illustrate that students believe that in order for typically developing children to be accepting and sensitive to those with special needs, a certain level of education needs to occur. However, the responses demonstrate a wide range of ways in which teachers view this education. Lieber et al. (1998) noticed a similar phenomenon in their study involving early childhood teachers. Some teachers hoped to educate typically developing children about differences by ignoring them, some thought teachers should deal with questions as they arose, and others believed that teachers should highlight and respect differences among children.

Participants in the Intermediate and Advanced Group also stressed the importance of setting goals for individual children and helping them accomplish those goals.

> You need to have a goal and be working on that goal for that specific child. You can't expect the whole classroom to have that same goal. (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

> You need to help children reach their goals, their IEP goals. (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

Finally, participants in the Intermediate and Advanced Groups often spoke of issues of collaboration that occur in inclusive settings. First, they stated that they had learned that it was acceptable to rely on others as resources and ask advice from other professionals. They seemed relieved that they were not expected to know the answers to all questions, but could ask for help when necessary.

> I think it's important to not be afraid to ask for help. Before, I was always, like, "Ok. My teacher did all this stuff and she did it all by herself and she didn't have to ask for help from anybody." I'm slowly learning that there are so many people that are there as resources for you and that I shouldn't be afraid to say, "Ok. I really don't know how to deal with this child and their disability and I need information and help dealing with it." I think that if teachers know their limits, it's a good thing. (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

> You need to find out where your resources are and who they are. Like when you go into the school to get a job. Find out who is going to be helping you. 'Cause I never knew half of these people existed, you know? There's all kinds of people—you're not by yourself. (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

Bricker (1995) stated that access to specialists and collaborators is important for two reasons. First, some children may have needs that require, at least initially, assessment and management that can be offered by a specialist trained in a particular area. Second, classroom teachers may need ongoing support and consultation to continue to meet the needs of children as they arise. The Intermediate and Advanced students in this study recognize the need to collaborate with other professionals and use the knowledge of specialists when necessary.

Even though students recognized the benefits of collaborating with other professionals, they also believe that there would be times when working with so many other individuals could present a challenge. They stated that different people would have different opinions, making it difficult to decide how to best meet the needs of the children.

> I'm watching the teacher across the room from me. She's got advice coming from parents and from all of the professionals in her room and she has to sort through all of that information and decide what she is going to do in her classroom to best fit the needs of her kids. And I really feel like her role is much more complicated than anybody else's just because of that one reason. She's got one person asking her to rearrange her entire room around one child. So she has to sort through all of that and decide what is going to be most important for her. (Advanced Focus Group, 92899)

> Also, if you work with assistant teachers—I think that would be a challenge just being able to accommodate everyone and working with a co-teacher (Intermediate Interview, 5900)

Cavallaro and Haney (1999) agree that successful collaboration can be difficult to achieve. Special attention needs to be devoted to training early childhood educators and other professionals to be effective collaborators.

Professional Issues in Early Childhood Education

Common topics of discussion among the Beginner and Intermediate Groups were those related to professional issues in the field of early childhood education including 1) Societal views of early childhood education and 2) Expectations and concerns about becoming an early childhood teacher.

Societal Views of Early Childhood Education

One of the main concerns of participants in the Beginner and Intermediate Groups was the way that society views early childhood education as a profession. Students spoke frequently of the fact that teachers are "underpaid and under-appreciated." The financial compensation that teachers receive was a serious concern for students in the Beginner Group. This concern is echoed by Fromberg (1997) who stated the early childhood educators are underpaid, especially those employed outside of public school systems. They were also concerned that schools don't receive the financial support needed and that this lack of support will be evident in individual classrooms.

> I think I'm going to have problems with the financial issue. First of all, I know that all school districts aren't on the same level because of the tax base and things like that. I want my kids to be able to have their computer programs and be able to have access to things like the internet or good quality markers and stuff. I guess it's kind of good for me to be working in state programs now because we don't have a lot of markers and we don't

> have a lot of things. That's very frustrating....I think teachers should be paid better. I really honestly do and I don't think we are [paid] as much as we should be. I don't want to be paid millions of dollars. I accept that I'm probably not going to make a lot of money—that's fine. But I just don't think teachers are viewed as worth what they are. (Beginner Focus Group, 101799)

While this concern about low compensation is also a concern for the Intermediate Group, they are also frustrated with the lack of support and respect teachers receive for the difficulty of teaching young children. Students in this group are especially frustrated when others comment that working with children is "easy" and that "all you do is play all day."

> It's frustrating when people underestimate teachers and I'm like, "Do you see everything that we do? We're parents to the kids, we teach the kids." They don't realize the amount of work that some kids require, what we do for them. (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

> I have playdough on my shoes and people are like, "Oh, it must be nice to work with kids." And I was writing some sentence strips and they were like, "That's your homework?" I get that all the time. And they're like, "What do you have to do? You have to color in all this stuff and do all this easy stuff." And I'm, like, "It might be easy to me, but I want to see you try it, Mr. Engineer!" (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

Students' concerns about this issue are not unfounded as Fromberg (1997) stated that laypeople "often find it difficult to locate the specialized mastery of a body of knowledge and skills in the external practice of early childhood education, first, because the most exemplary practice needs to look playful, and second, because most early childhood workers have not received specialized professional preparation" (p. 188)

Participants in the Intermediate Group also stated that they are not in the field of early childhood education to make a lot of money, but to make a difference in the lives of children.

> And everyone says, "Oh, you don't get paid much." And it's, like, "Well, obviously that's probably not why we're doing this." It just frustrates me 'cause, who cares? And why do they care? They're not the ones getting paid less. That really frustrates me, too. (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

> I'm at the point that I know I want to teach and I know there's nothing else that I would be happy doing. So when people say, "Why do you want to be a teacher? You're not going to make any money." I'm not in it for the money, I'm in it for the kids. I'm in it for being a role model to them. Whenever people start to make fun of me, you know, "Oh! You're a teacher. That's going to be easy." I say, "Well, who taught you to read? Who taught you to add?" (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

Finally, participants in the Intermediate Group also expressed frustration at the lack of knowledge others have about the major of early childhood education and grow tired of explaining their career choice to others.

> I've talked to some of my parents' friends who think that ECE is only before school. ...My dad says, "Why are you going to school to work in a daycare? I'm like, "It's not daycare. Not if you don't want it to be." (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

> I always feel like I have to explain myself when I tell people my major. They're, like, "What's your major?" "Well, I'm early childhood education." Then I go into this big whole explanation of why I want to do it and, you know...(Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

Expectations and Concerns about Becoming an Early Childhood Teacher

One of the main concerns that participants in the Beginner and Intermediate Groups had about becoming an early childhood teacher was the possibility that their philosophies of early childhood education would differ from those in the setting in which they will be working. They are concerned that they will be confronted with situations in which their personal beliefs are in conflict with the administrators of the program in which they will be teaching.

> We've learned a lot about developmentally appropriate practice and things...you might get into some school districts that say, "It doesn't really

> matter what stage these kids are at. We want them to know this, this, and this." And they want you to go exactly by the book. (Beginner Interview, 11400)

> I'm afraid that I'm going to get into a school district or a situation where I have to defend my philosophy and my values and that because of what I think, it won't agree with what they think and I'll be out of a job. That's my biggest fear. That I will have to take a stand and it will be a little stand because I'll be all by myself. (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

When asked to explain why they believe that there may be a conflict between their personal philosophies and those of the program they will be working in, they described the belief that many schools or programs don't "change with the times" and are resistant to new ideas.

> I think some schools just don't keep up maybe. They start to fall behind a little bit. They get stuck in their rut of doing things, somewhat, and they don't want to change. So they're not really ready to accept new points of view maybe. (Beginner Interview, 11400)

> I think that we're coming out of school with so many new ideas and so many new perspectives and fresh outlooks on things. We're having to work with these administrators who are older...They're older and they've been away from school for a long time and even if they have continued to take some classes, I think that it will be tough. We might have some difficulties working with them and wanting to integrate our new ideas into the program. ...I think that one of my difficulties is going to be being vocal about what I really think about things. And not just going along with what the program is like at the point I get hired. (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

Another concern that the Beginner Group expressed was a fear of becoming "burnt-out". They expressed this concern in terms of worrying about the high level of emotional involvement in teaching, as well as worrying that a lack of acknowledgement, respect, and support would contribute to feelings of burn-out.

> It's a very emotional job. I think a lot of teachers have the tendency to throw themselves into their job and, not that we shouldn't love our children and we shouldn't care for our families, but if that's the only thing that you have, you're just going to get burnt out. ...Get another life on the outside 'cause if you don't have it and things start going downhill, you're just going to burn out and not want

to be part of it anymore. (Beginner Focus Group, 101799)

> I think it's very common for teachers to get burnt out, too, and when there isn't like a support for a teacher to be appreciated or even something nice the community does once a year to show their appreciation—I think that would probably help. But when the teacher feels like they've done the same thing for so long and even though it probably really is noticed, especially by the kids...But when you start to feel that way, I think it's easy for you to just give in and say, "Ok. I've come this far. I just don't have any more left." (Beginner Focus Group, 101799)

The Intermediate Group spoke frequently of concerns they have related to getting a job when they are finished with school. The following conversation illustrates concerns they have about how prepared they are for the "job search."

> I went to the Family and Consumer Sciences career fair. They had nothing. I don't expect them to have schools and stuff, but I'd like a panel of, like, a principal, a teacher or school psychologists or counselors or somebody that we could just go for a day and visit with them. I just want more resources to go to. 'Cause I didn't find it helpful at all and that's where other people get their jobs. We don't even get contacts or anything. I'd just like to talk to teachers and say, "What are you going through?"
>
> "What do you look for when you're hiring?"
>
> "How did you get hired?" or "What questions did they ask you?"
>
> "Are portfolios a big deal? How do I even go about applying and interviewing and how do you find jobs?"
>
> "Do you put in applications? When do you start? Who's interviewing? Who interviews you, the principal or other teachers?" I have no idea.
>
> "Do you have to teach a lesson?" (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

In spite of these concerns, participants in the Intermediate Group seemed confident that majoring in early childhood education was a good choice and will help them get a job. They were also glad to have training in a unified curriculum, believing that this experience will make them stand out as an applicant.

> I'm glad I've chosen this major now because I hear that a lot of school districts will not hire an El. Ed. person for a kindergarten or first grade job. They want people with our degree. (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

> And I think that when we go to apply for a job and they see our resume, they're going to be like, "Oh! This person has the qualifications to work with children with special needs or they want to. We can put children with disabilities in their classroom." We might not know everything, but we're going to have a better grasp than people who have never talked about it. (Intermediate Interview, 12600)

The participants in the Intermediate Group also spoke of how they enjoyed the opportunity to meet and talk about their field with people sharing similar interests.

> This is the most I've ever talked about [early childhood education] in my life! It feels good. (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

> It can be encouraging and exciting to see so many people that have the same enthusiasm as you do and know that they're going to be teaching somewhere someday and are going to be doing a really good job. I think that's exciting. (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

> I feel so professional. It's like all of a sudden, I'm here. Wow! I can talk about this and sound like an educated person. It's kind of nice! (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)

Interestingly, the theme of professional issues in early childhood education did not emerge from data collected from the Advanced Group. There are several possible explanations for this group's apparent lack of concern about this topic. First, as mentioned previously, students in the Advanced Group seem to be more aware of their areas of personal weakness than members of the other groups. Due to their experiences as student teachers, it is possible that these areas of perceived weakness have become a more important area of concern and they were no longer able to focus on concerns surrounding professional issues.

Another explanation could be that once student teachers actually became more involved in early childhood settings, they realized that some of these types of concerns were unfounded. For example, it is possible that while students in the Beginner and Intermediate Groups expressed concern about potential conflicts related to philosophy, the Advanced Groups learned that these conflicts did not occur.

Finally, a third explanation for this apparent lack of concern about these issues could be related to student teachers' environments. Because student teachers are now surrounded by other educators on a daily basis, they are less likely to be exposed to the questions and criticisms of others.

Influences on the Development of Preservice Teachers' Beliefs

Another goal of the current study was to explore students' perceptions regarding influences on the development of their beliefs. A commonality across the three groups and a link between the five themes stems from students' responses regarding influences on students' beliefs systems. The findings of this study offer support for previous literature describing students' previous beliefs and experiences as having a strong impact on the formation of students' beliefs (Hollingsworth, 1989; Nespor, 1987). For example, many students in the current study described their early childhood classroom experiences as being structured with children completing "seat work" such as worksheets and timed tests. Based on these experiences, students described a feeling of surprise when they first began their early childhood teacher education program and realized that these methods were not promoted as best practice for young children.

> Everything was structured. The thing that I thought was really weird going into my practicum was that it's so much easier going. The kids are going around the room. When you were in elementary school and you were out of your seat, you

> were asked, "Why are you out of your seat?" (Intermediate Focus Group, 101099)
>
> I always liked school, but I remember a lot of kids in my classes, they just weren't interested in doing seat work and it was hard for them to succeed because they didn't want to be there. And I think to provide them with activities that they enjoy and are interested in, they learn the exact same thing that they learned from the seat work, but they are interested in it and it would encourage them to learn more and to like it (Beginner Focus Group, 101099)

Students' also described their parents as influencing their beliefs about certain issues such as discipline.

> There are a lot of things that my parents did. I think my parents are great and things, but there are a lot of things that I always thought were ok. Like, I was spanked and I always thought that was fine, but now after being at school I don't think that's an ok practice. (Beginner Focus Group, 101099)

Statements such as this shed light on the previous discussion regarding student's beliefs surrounding guidance and discipline and their recognition that their beliefs about this topic had changed greatly as they were trained in early childhood education. The discrepancy between students' incoming beliefs and those of the early childhood program may also offer insight into why this is cited by Hollingsworth (1989) as one of the greatest challenges teachers experience when working with young children.

In addition to the influence of previous experiences, students described aspects of their teacher education program that have had the most impact on shaping their belief systems. Not surprisingly, students described their field experiences (labs) as being the aspect of the program that taught them the most. They believed that the observation of experienced teachers, as well as the trial and error process afforded by active participation influenced their beliefs about many aspects of early childhood education.

This finding finds much support in previous literature (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; McDermott et al., 1995).

> I think through the labs and watching teachers actually do a lot of these things in the daycares and things. I think that's even more effective than just hearing it in class—seeing it actually work (Beginner Interview, 11400)

> I learned a lot in classes. But when I started going out for labs at daycares you could see the behavior modeled by the other teachers and I really picked up on that. I seem to learn better by experience—from just being in the settings. You can only read so much. It's good to read and get ideas, but I think that experience is better (Intermediate Interview, 12600)

> I think making mistakes has helped me, too. I made so many mistakes this summer and I'm still making them. I don't care if I make mistakes, you know? I don't care what people think—I think that's one of the best learning experiences (Advanced Focus Group, 92899)

Students also described methods advocated by a constructivist approach such as active learning activities, group discussion, and choicemaking as being especially influential on their learning.

> We need more experience. And even in the [university] classroom—more scenarios, more hands-on. But just using the textbook is not that effective. If you converse over it in the group or develop strategies together that is helpful, I think. (Advanced Interview, 12000)

One student even addressed the importance of college instructors modeling appropriate teaching methods as recommended by Bufkin and Bryde (1996).

> I always think it's hilarious that in college we're taught the way we are. Children learn exactly the opposite way that we are taught in lecture. So we learn how to teach the way that we shouldn't be teaching. (Intermediate Focus Group,101099)

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study added important information to the sparse amount of literature on the beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers. The study of student beliefs can have important implications for early childhood teacher education programs.

Focus group and interview data were analyzed revealing students' beliefs surrounding five themes: 1) Children's Learning and Development; 2) Working with Groups of Children; 3) Relationships; 4) Inclusion; and 5) Professional Issues in Early Childhood Education.

In relation to children's learning and development, participants spoke of topics related to the characteristics of young children as learners, what children should learn in early childhood and how young children learn. The responses of the three groups were similar with the exception of students' views regarding children as having individual learning needs and abilities. While the Beginner Group had an overall awareness of children's individual differences, they did not describe ways that teachers can facilitate the learning of individual children. They offered strategies for making learning fun and interesting for the group as a whole, while the Intermediate and Advanced Groups discussed using their knowledge of children's unique interests and abilities to enhance the individual child's learning.

When discussing their work with groups of young children, participants most often spoke of guidance and discipline. Participants stated that they had experienced substantial changes in their views toward guidance and discipline, but described the strategies that they used to handle guidance situations in very different ways. For example, the Beginner Group talked primarily of the importance of speaking to young children in a positive way, while the Intermediate and Advanced Groups described specific strategies such as redirection and providing clear expectations for children's behavior. In addition, the Advanced Group also spoke of the importance of choosing strategies that best meet the unique needs of individual children.

Participants in the three groups also approached the issue of curriculum and planning in very different ways. The Beginner Group predominantly discussed the importance of planning activities that were developmentally appropriate. Participants in the Intermediate Group, however, focused less on the challenge of choosing appropriate activities than did the Beginner Group. Instead, they talked about the challenge of planning to meet the needs of individual children. While participants in the Intermediate Group were mostly concerned with choosing activities that could be easily adapted to meet the needs of each child, the Advanced Group expressed a greater concern about the actual implementation of these activities.

Students also described their thoughts concerning the relationships they would develop with children and families while working in an early childhood setting. They envision their relationship with children as being a loving, trusting and caring relationship. They want to support and guide children's learning and described early childhood educators as role models for young children. Participants also expressed concern that early childhood teachers may be required to fulfill the role of a parent by providing the love, attention, and stability that some children may not receive at home. One aspect of the relationship with children that differed for each group was the way that they desired the children to view them as teachers. The Beginner Group wanted the children to like them and to enjoy coming to school. The Intermediate Group and Advanced Groups also spoke of wanting the children to like them, but preferred the children to respect them as an authority figure and disciplinarian. In addition, the Advanced Group described the relationship as being different with each child, based on the child's individual needs.

When describing the relationship that they desire to have with families, participants emphasized the importance of open communication. In addition, participants described the necessity of teachers supporting differences in families and understanding how those differences impact their work with children. A difference between the three groups emerged from the descriptions of the nature or quality of the relationship that they expect to have with families. The Beginner Group expected their relationship with parents to be extremely challenging. They spoke frequently of the need to avoid and resolve conflict with parents and cope with those who are critical and judgmental. Participants in the Intermediate and Advanced Groups placed less emphasis on the potential conflict with parents than did the Beginner Group, instead describing them as valuable to the child's learning experience in the early childhood setting.

Some of the most interesting findings of this study were related to the topic of inclusion. When describing their beliefs about inclusion, the Beginner Group struggled with the concept of inclusion and questioned it as best practice for young children. Participants in the Intermediate Group agreed that working in inclusive settings could be challenging, but that the benefits outweighed the struggles they may experience. Similarly, the Advanced Group was in support of inclusive programming and was more able to clearly articulate reasons for this belief. They described that actually seeing inclusion implemented successfully greatly influenced their beliefs regarding this issue.

In addition, members of all three groups spoke of the need to adapt and modify curriculum to meet the needs of individual children in inclusive settings. However, they approached this issue in very different ways. The Beginner Group described this as a necessary practice, but expressed anxiety about their ability and desire to do so. Students

in the Intermediate and Advanced Groups also described the adaptation and modification of curricular activities as a challenge, but expressed a more positive attitude about the process than the Beginner Group. They also spoke of specific strategies to make inclusion successful for all children.

Students in the Beginner and Intermediate Groups spoke of professional issues in early childhood education such as societal views of early childhood education and concerns they had about becoming a teacher. For example, they described low pay as a reflection of society's view of the value of teachers and were frustrated that people didn't recognize the challenging nature of their work. In addition, students were concerned that their philosophies of early childhood education would conflict with those of the administrators and others they would work with in the future. Interestingly, these concerns did not arise when speaking to members of the Advanced Group.

Limitations

There are limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. First, even though many beginning level students volunteered during the recruiting phase of this study, it was difficult to ensure their attendance at the focus group meetings. Unfortunately, this led to three of the focus groups consisting of only two or three participants. Because the recommended group size for focus groups is between six to eight participants, it is possible that the smaller group sizes influenced the dynamics of the group. Flores and Alonso (1995) cautioned that without at least six members in a focus group, open and lively discussion may be compromised. It is possible that providing more compensation for those participating in the focus groups would have increased the rate of participation.

This low level of participation from students in the beginning stages of the early childhood education program can be interpreted in many different ways. For example, it is possible that Beginner students aren't as committed to the field of early childhood education as the Intermediate and Advanced students. In fact, it is likely that some of the beginning students asked to participate in this study will change majors before they graduate. It is less likely that the students in the Intermediate and Advanced Groups will change their majors, due to the time invested into their program. Additionally, the Intermediate and Advanced students had completed many upper level courses and have a clearer picture of the appropriateness of their career choice. It is also possible that students at the beginning level did not feel comfortable regarding their knowledge and skills of the field of early childhood education and when asked to share their ideas felt intimidated or nervous about the process.

Another limitation of the current study relates to the voluntary nature of participation. It is possible that students who chose to participate in this study have different views regarding early childhood education than students who chose not to participate, resulting in a potential bias. To address this problem in the future, students could share their beliefs and ideas in the context of a required course or component of their early childhood education program.

Implications for Early Childhood Teacher Education

The findings of this study have several implications for the field of early childhood teacher education. As stated previously, one of the most beneficial aspects of teacher preparation programs is the field experience component (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990). Students' responses in the current study lead to several recommendations to

enhance field experiences, providing the most beneficial experience possible for early childhood education majors. First, a key aspect of providing successful practica is early experience. The benefits of early experience was documented by Goodman (1985) who suggested that early field experiences can benefit teacher education students in many ways, including enhancing the students' sense of autonomy, creativity, and thoughtfulness. The current study suggests that early field experiences can be beneficial in other ways, as well. For example, early experiences in inclusive programs may help beginning students develop a more appropriate belief system toward working with children with special needs.

As described previously, many Intermediate and Advanced students stated that they were unaware of the likelihood that they would be working with children in inclusive programs until they had reached their upper level courses. Many students stated that even though they were aware that their degree prepared them to work with children with and without special needs, they had begun their program with intentions of working only in "regular classrooms." As they progressed through their program, students stated that they gained a more realistic viewpoint about this topic and recognized the likelihood that their work with young children would include children diagnosed with special needs. This viewpoint is important to understand because several students believed that if they had possessed a more realistic viewpoint from the beginning of their program, it would have impacted their teacher education program. For example, one student stated that she would have "paid more attention" to the information regarding children with special needs in her early courses if she had actually believed that this was a likely aspect of her career in early childhood education. This finding is supported by previous literature

stating that students' perspectives upon entrance into their teacher education programs serve as filters through which they make sense of their training experiences (Hollingsworth, 1989). Perhaps if students were convinced of the importance of this subject matter earlier in their program, they would benefit more from courses presenting this content.

In order to convince students of the importance of knowledge surrounding their work in inclusive settings, it is important that they have an accurate picture of the practice of inclusion. Many students believe that their struggle with the concept of inclusion was due, in part, to the fact that they had not been exposed to inclusive education prior to their teacher education program. They stated that because working with children with special needs is a new experience, that they were nervous and afraid about their role in this process. If students are exposed to inclusive programs early in their field experiences, they will have the opportunity to increase their comfort level and clarify any inaccurate perceptions they may have regarding inclusive programming before they reach their upper level courses. It would seem that allowing students the opportunity to work through issues of discomfort and uncertainty early in their program would allow the students to focus more on upper level content issues such as curriculum and assessment.

Enhancing students' early inclusive experiences may require clarifying students' definitions of inclusive practice. For example, several Advanced students stated that they had not been placed in inclusive programs until their senior year. This is an inaccurate account, however. It is possible that most students have been placed in inclusive programs or classrooms much earlier than their final year, but failed to recognize them as such. The students in this early childhood program complete a practicum during their

senior year that requires them to work at an early childhood center serving many children with special needs. It is not uncommon in this setting for a classroom to have up to eight children with special needs included with typically developing children. However, students' earlier experiences in inclusive programs may have involved only one child with special needs, perhaps diagnosed with a mild disability such as a developmental delay or ADHD. The challenge remains in convincing students that classrooms such as these are inclusive, not only those serving several children diagnosed with severe disabilities.

In terms of implications for teacher educators, it seems that a goal should be to help students effectively link course content to their field experiences. For example, university instructors and cooperating teachers may need to identify children with mild disabilities to students, with an emphasis on strategies used to successfully include that child in the classroom. Because a goal of successful inclusion is to allow children to experience education in the most natural environment possible, these strategies may not be obvious to students beginning their field experiences with little knowledge of inclusive practice. Teacher educators must be cognizant of the fact that students may not have an accurate perception of the "behind the scenes" work that occurs in inclusive programs and may need help to recognize and understand the intricacies of inclusion.

Another implication of the current research is related to the level of family interaction that occurs in students' field experiences. Beginner students expressed substantial anxiety about the prospect of working with parents and expected their relationships with them to be characterized by conflict and criticism. While Intermediate and Advanced students expressed somewhat more positive views about relationships with

parents, they continued to describe parent interactions as being a challenging aspect of their job. Many were concerned about getting parent involvement to the degree desired by the teacher or sharing information or concerns with them regarding their children.

To help students reconcile these concerns and increase their comfort level when working with parents, it seems as though it would be beneficial to allow students to take a more active role in parent interactions in their field placements. This may include requiring students to initiate contact with parents, write newsletters or other forms of correspondence, plan and implement a family activity, or participate in parent-teacher conferences. Although these activities typically occur at the level of student teaching, earlier experience with family involvement would be valuable. In addition to field experiences, university instructors could enhance students' understanding of parental relationships by highlighting parents' roles in their child's education from the beginning of their early childhood teacher education program. This recommendation is supported by Briggs, Jalongo, and Brown (1997) who stated that a commitment to families must begin with teacher education programs. They believe that this is an aspect of teacher education that is not addressed adequately. Becher (1986) also supported the recommendation for an increased focus on parent interactions by advocating for an emphasis on helping students identify their own beliefs about various aspects of parent involvement. "It is only when teachers become aware of their own fears, concerns, and negative feelings that they are able to rationally eliminate them and to develop more effective strategies" (Becher, p. 109).

In addition to helping students recognize their own belief systems and the ways in which their beliefs and attitudes impact their actions, it is important for teacher educators

to be aware of what students believe and how they interpret information presented to them. It is not enough to focus on students' beliefs upon entrance to their teacher education program, but to monitor and understand students' changing beliefs and attitudes throughout their entire program. An example is offered by the fact that students in this study emphasized the teaching of social and emotional skills to young children in early childhood settings, but rarely discussed the importance of teaching cognitive, motor, and language skills. Exploring students' beliefs around this issue would shed light on why they so obviously neglected to discuss these domains. It is possible that the students misinterpreted the intentions of teacher educators who promoted naturalistic procedures as more appropriate methods for teaching such skills, instead perceiving this approach as meaning that these domains are not as important to teach very young children. This is just one example of a situation in which it would be beneficial to explore students' thinking allowing any misconceptions to be addressed and clarified.

Another important implication from these findings is related to the relationship that early childhood education students have with the cooperating teachers with whom they work in their field experiences. Research documents that cooperating teachers have the potential to influence the development of preservice teachers' beliefs and attitudes (Renzaglia et al., 1997). Renzaglia et al. stated that because of this potential influence, care should be taken in choosing and training cooperating teachers. The findings of the current study highlight several challenges inherent when working with cooperating teachers in a variety of early childhood settings. Because of the potential influence these individuals have on the beliefs of preservice teachers, it would seem ideal to choose experienced teachers who support and demonstrate the philosophies promoted in the

early childhood teacher education program. However, it is not always possible to choose the teachers with whom preservice teachers work. Efforts have been made through accreditation procedures to ensure the high quality of early childhood programs and their teachers, but there are not always enough of these placements available for every undergraduate student. To counteract this problem, it seems as though training cooperating teachers through the use of orientation meetings or written materials such as handbooks, would help ensure that the cooperating teachers are aware of the university program's goals for students and the kinds of experiences that would benefit students most. In this study, many students stated that they were not sure of their boundaries while participating in experienced teachers' programs and felt torn between implementing practice taught in their teacher education program that may be in contrast with the practice of the classroom teacher. Perhaps if teacher education programs made explicitly clear the desired experiences for students, cooperating teachers would be more willing and able to provide those specific experiences.

Finally, this study has implications for the methods used to instruct students enrolled in early childhood education programs. Previous literature suggests that adults benefit from a constructivist approach to learning characterized by opportunities for active learning techniques, reflective practice, and choicemaking (Bufkin & Bryde, 1996). The findings of this study support this claim. Many students stated that these techniques were critical to the development of their skills and beliefs. In addition, many students believe they would benefit from even more active learning strategies. Because this perspective comes from learners themselves, this is valuable advice that should not be ignored by early childhood teacher educators.

Implications for Future Research

The exploration of early childhood preservice teachers' beliefs is a necessary component of the design and implementation of early childhood teacher education programs. The current study also provides several opportunities for future research. For example, future studies should add an observation component to studies of beliefs to examine the congruency between students' beliefs and their actions. This would not only serve to improve teacher education programs, but allow students the opportunity to recognize any discrepancies that may occur between their beliefs and practice. In addition, students may also be able to detect any underlying belief systems that lead them to act in ways that are not appropriate for their work with young children and their families.

Future studies probing more deeply into the beliefs of beginning students would also be of interest. Included in these explorations should be an emphasis on previous experiences and how those experiences have impacted the development of their belief systems. With this knowledge, teacher education programs can better design curriculum to meet the individual needs of students.

The participants in the current study were white female undergraduates, most of whom began college immediately following high school. Future research would benefit from the exploration of a more diverse group, including teacher education students from diverse cultures, males, and non-traditional students. It is possible that each of these individual's previous experiences influence their belief systems in unique ways.

CHAPTER 4. GENERAL CONCLUSION

The purpose of these two papers is to explore the beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers and influences on the development of those beliefs. The review of literature provides readers with a background of previous research conducted in this area. While there has been recent interest in the beliefs of preservice teachers, few studies relate specifically to the beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers. The second paper addresses this need.

The second paper in this dissertation qualitatively examines the beliefs of 19 early childhood education students at Iowa State University. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted to explore several topics (e.g., teacher role, inclusion, parent involvement).

This paper contributes to the sparse literature regarding the beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers. The following five themes emerged from students' discussions of their beliefs surrounding early childhood education: 1) Children's Learning and Development; 2) Working with Groups of Children; 3) Relationships; 4) Inclusion; and 5) Professional Issues in Early Childhood Education. Students in the three groups demonstrated differences in their beliefs surrounding strategies to facilitate young children's learning, curriculum and planning for individual children, relationships with parents, and the practice and implementation of inclusion.

Understanding early childhood preservice teachers' beliefs and influences on the development of those beliefs has important implications for early childhood teacher education programs. For example, students in the current study often had inaccurate beliefs surrounding the practice of inclusion upon entrance into their teacher education

program. Teacher educators need to be aware of these beliefs and aid students in developing attitudes that are more appropriate for their work with young children and their families. In addition, the findings of this study suggest that a greater emphasis needs to be placed on parent involvement and relationships at the beginning level of students' programs. This would improve prospective teachers' comfort level when working with families and help them better integrate families' needs and priorities into children's learning experiences.

Finally, students' responses in the current study supported previous literature that claims that learning opportunities in accordance with a constructivist approach to early childhood teacher education are effective in shaping students' belief systems.

APPENDIX A
HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW COMMITTEE APPROVAL

Last name of Principal Investigator Baum

Checklist for Attachments and Time Schedule

The following are attached (please check):

12. ☒ Letter or written statement to subjects indicating clearly:
    a) the purpose of the research
    b) the use of any identifier codes (names, #'s), how they will be used, and when they will be removed (see item 17)
    c) an estimate of time needed for participation in the research
    d) if applicable, the location of the research activity
    e) how you will ensure confidentiality
    f) in a longitudinal study, when and how you will contact subjects later
    g) that participation is voluntary; nonparticipation will not affect evaluations of the subject

13. ☐ Signed consent form (if applicable)

14. ☐ Letter of approval for research from cooperating organizations or institutions (if applicable)

15. ☒ Data-gathering instruments

16. Anticipated dates for contact with subjects:

First contact	Last contact
7/6/99	05/15/2000
Month/Day/Year	Month/Day/Year

17. If applicable: anticipated date that identifiers will be removed from completed survey instruments and/or audio or visual tapes will be erased:

_____
Month/Day/Year

18. Signature of Departmental Executive Officer	Date	Department or Administrative Unit
Marina MacDonell John R. Keith	6/28/99	HDFS

19. Decision of the University Human Subjects Review Committee:
☒ Project approved ☐ Project not approved ☐ No action required

Name of Human Subjects in Research Committee Chair	Date	Signature of Committee Chair
Patricia M. Keith	7-9-99	PMKeith

APPENDIX B
LETTER TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION MAJORS

Dear Early Childhood Education Major,

I am a doctoral student in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Iowa State University. This fall I will be conducting my dissertation research exploring undergraduate students' perceptions of early childhood education. Currently, I am searching for students who would be willing to participate in this research project. If you choose to be involved, you will participate in a focus group (group interview) which will be conducted on campus in late August and September, lasting approximately 1½ -2 hours. You will receive refreshments in exchange for your participation. In addition, after the completion of the focus group, some students will be asked to participate in an individual interview lasting approximately one hour. All focus groups will be video taped and all individual interviews will be audio taped.

All information exchanged in the focus groups and interviews will be kept confidential. All participants will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement prior to their participation in the focus groups. In addition, you will be identified by a pseudonym (false name) whenever represented in published articles or in oral presentations. You are free to discontinue participation in the research project at any time.

If you would be willing to participate in this study, please complete the enclosed questionnaire and return it to me. Not everyone who returns this questionnaire will be chosen to participate in the focus groups. If you have any questions, please call me in my office at (515)294-0785 or at home at (515)296-1455. Additionally, you can reach me by email at abaum@iastate.edu. I would be happy to discuss this project with you. Thank you for consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Angela Baum, M.S.
Graduate Student

Paula McMurray-Schwarz, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor

APPENDIX C
SELECTION QUESTIONNIARE

Please return this survey by **July 23, 1999.**
101 Child Development Building
Ames, Iowa 50010

Name: _____ Age: _____ Gender_____

1. Did you begin college immediately following high school?
   _____Yes
   _____No

   If not, how long did you wait before you began college? _____

2. Did you transfer to Iowa State from another university, college, or community college?
   _____Yes
   _____No

3. Please indicate your previous work with young children and how long you worked in each setting (check all that apply):

Experience	**How long?**
_____head teacher in a preschool or daycare setting	_____ years _____months
_____assistant teacher in a preschool or daycare setting	_____ years _____months
_____provided home daycare for 6 or more children in your home	_____ years _____months
_____elementary school teacher	_____ years _____months
_____assistant in an elementary school classroom	_____ years _____months
_____babysitting	_____ years _____months
_____other (please describe) _____ _____	_____ years _____months

4. How many children of your own do you have?_____ Their ages: _____

5. After completing your degree, with which age group would you prefer to work? (check all that apply)

_____Infants/Toddlers _____Preschoolers _____Kindergarteners
_____1st-3rd Graders _____No preference

PLEASE COMPLETE OTHER SIDE

6. Please check the courses that you have completed or are taking this summer:

_____ HDFS 220 (Development & Guidance: Birth-2)
_____ HDFS 221 (Development & Guidance: 3-8)
_____ El Ed 245 (Strategies for Teaching)
_____ El Ed 268 (Strategies Practicum)
_____ HDFS 340 (Assessment & Curriculum: Birth-2)
_____ HDFS 343 (Assessment & Programming: 3-6)
_____ HDFS 345 (Adapting Programming in Inclusive Settings)
_____ El Ed 367 (Teaching Literacy in Primary Grades)
_____ HDFS 455 (Curricula Ages 3-6)
_____ HDFS 456 (Family Focused Interventions for Young Children)
_____ El Ed 433 (Teaching Social Studies in the Primary Grades)
_____ El Ed 438 (Teaching Math in the Primary Grades)
_____ El Ed 439 (Teaching Science in the Primary Grades)
_____ El Ed 468F (Supervised Practicum in Teaching Literacy)
_____ El Ed 468G (Supervised Practicum in Teaching Mathematics)
_____ El Ed 468I (Supervised Practicum in Teaching Science)
_____ I have completed or am currently enrolled in my student teaching experience

7. Approximately how many college credits have you completed? _____

8. Have you been admitted to the teacher education licensure program?
_____Yes
_____ No

9. Is your GPA at or above a 2.5?
_____Yes
_____No

10. Is your ACT score at or above 19?
_____Yes
_____No

If not, have you passed the PPST (Pre-Professional Skills Test)?
_____Yes
_____No

Your current phone number: _____

Your fall address: _____

Your fall phone number: _____

Your email address: _____

Thank you!

Please indicate which times you would likely be able to participate in a focus group (check all that apply):

_____Monday evening
_____Tuesday evening
_____Wednesday evening
_____Thursday evening
_____Friday evening
_____Saturday afternoon
_____Saturday evening
_____Sunday afternoon
_____Sunday evening

Name:_____

APPENDIX D
COURSE DESCRIPTIONS

HD FS 220. Development and Guidance: Ages Birth through 2 Years.
(2-2)[a] Typical and atypical development from birth through two years of age. Development and guidance within the contexts of family, program, and society. Guided observation of physical, motor, cognitive, communication, social, and emotional development; participation in an infant care center.

HD FS 221. Development and Guidance: Ages 3 through 8 Years.
(2-2) Typical and atypical development from three through eight years of age. Development and guidance within the contexts of family, program, and society. Guided observation of physical, motor, cognitive, communication, social, and emotional development; participation in an accredited preprimary program.

El Ed[b] 245. Strategies in Teaching.
(2-0) Introduction to elementary education teaching strategies, classroom management, and curriculum organization.

El Ed 268. Strategies Practicum.
(0-2) Clinical experience, to be taken concurrently with 245.

HD FS 340. Assessment and Curricula: Ages Birth through 2 Years.
(3-3) Assessment strategies for infants and toddlers, including those with special needs. Curricula, learning environments, teaching strategies, health and nutritional practices, and schedules that are developmentally, individually, and culturally appropriate. Using assessment to plan, implement, and evaluate activities to promote physical, motor, cognitive, communication, and social-emotional development.

HD FS 343. Assessment and Programming: Ages 3 through 6 Years.
(3-3) Assessment strategies for preschool and kindergarten children, including those with special needs. Learning environments, schedules, activities, nutritional practices, and teaching strategies that are developmentally, individually, and culturally appropriate. Using assessment to plan, implement and evaluate activities to promote physical motor, cognitive, communication, and social-emotional development.

HD FS 345. Adapting Programming in Inclusive Settings.
(3-0) Adapting materials and equipment to meet social, cognitive, nutritional, physical motor, communication, and medical needs of children, birth through 8, with diverse learning needs and multiple disabilities in inclusive settings for young children. Appraisal and management of specialized health care needs. Designing and evaluating individual education plans.

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[a] The first number in parentheses denotes the hours per week spent in lecture; the second number denotes the hours per week of practicum experience.
[b] Elementary Education (El Ed) courses have recently been renamed as Curriculum and Instruction Courses (C I). In this study, the label of El Ed was used because of its familiarity to students.

El Ed 367. Teaching Literacy in the Primary Grades.
(4-0) Theories, teaching strategies, materials, and learning experiences for kindergarten through third grade students. Formal and informal assessment strategies and instructional methods for diverse learners.

HD FS 455. Curricula for Ages 3 through 6 Years.
(3-3) Program models and methods leading to development and organization of appropriate curricula in preschool and kindergarten programs, for young children with diverse learning needs. Government regulations and professional standards for child programming. Teaming with parents, colleagues, and paraprofessionals to plan, implement, and evaluate developmentally and culturally appropriate individualized education plans in inclusive settings. Integrated practicum setting.

HD FS 456. Family-Focused Interventions for Young Children.
(3-1) Application of family systems theory in family-focused service delivery models. Teaming with parents and colleagues to plan, implement, and evaluate individualized family service plans. Focus on home-based intervention using routines and activities to embed intervention goals, family support, and linking families to community resources. Field experience in home-based programs.

El Ed 433. Teaching Social Studies in the Primary Grades.
(3-0) Study, development, and application of current methods for providing appropriate social studies learning experiences for primary grade children. Instructional strategies, curriculum content, and formal and informal assessment strategies for diverse learners.

El Ed 438. Teaching Mathematics in the Primary Grades.
(2-0) Study, development, and application of current methods for providing appropriate mathematics learning experiences for primary grade children. Formal and informal assessment strategies and instructional methods for diverse learners.

El Ed 439. Teaching Science in the Primary Grades.
(2-0) Study, development, and application of current methods for providing appropriate science learning experiences and processes for primary grade children. Formal and informal assessment strategies and instructional methods for diverse learners.

El Ed 468. Supervised Practicum in Teaching.
Observation, application of current methods, and instructional experiences with children in a supervised elementary classroom while engaged in other elementary methods courses.

F. Primary Grades, Literacy, Inclusive
G. Primary Grades, Mathematics, Inclusive
H. Primary Grades, Science, Inclusive

Source: Iowa State University Bulletin: Course and Programs 1999-2001

APPENDIX E
PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Participant Characteristics[a]

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent[b]
College Immediately After High School		
Yes	17	89.5%
No	2	10.5%
Transferred to Iowa State		
Yes	4	21.1%
No	15	78.9%
Previous Experience		
Head Teacher (Preschool/Daycare)	4	21.1%
Assistant Teacher (Preschool/Daycare)	12	63.2%
Home Daycare	0	0.0%
Elementary Teacher	0	0.0%
Assistant (Elementary Classroom)	3	15.8%
Babysitting	18	94.7%
Other	7	36.8%
Children of Own	0	0.0%

[a]N=19

[b] Because participants were able to respond to more than one appropriate answer, not all percentages equal 100%.

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Preferred Age Group		
Infants/Toddlers	4	21.1%
Preschoolers	10	52.6%
Kindergarteners	14	73.7%
1st-3rd Graders	10	52.6%
No Preference	1	5.3%
Completed College Credits		
0-30	1	5.3%
31-60	3	15.8%
61-90	3	15.8%
91-120	3	15.8%
120+	6	31.6%
Missing	3	15.8%
Admitted to Teacher Licensure Program	14	73.7%
Not Admitted, but Eligible for Admission into Teacher Licensure Program	5	26.3%

APPENDIX F
BEGINNER GROUP CHARACTERISTICS

Beginner Group Characteristics[a]

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent[b]
College Immediately After High School		
Yes	6	85.7%
No	1	14.3%
Transferred to Iowa State		
Yes	1	14.3%
No	6	85.7%
Previous Experience		
Head Teacher (Preschool/Daycare)	2	28.6%
Assistant Teacher (Preschool/Daycare)	3	42.9%
Home Daycare	0	0.0%
Elementary Teacher	0	0.0%
Assistant (Elementary Classroom)	1	14.3%
Babysitting	7	100.0%
Other	2	28.6%
Children of Own	0	0.0%

[a]N=7

[b] Because participants were able to respond to more than one appropriate answer, not all percentages equal 100%.

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Preferred Age Group		
Infants/Toddlers	4	57.1%
Preschoolers	3	42.9%
Kindergarteners	5	71.4%
1st-3rd Graders	2	28.6%
No Preference	1	14.3%
Completed College Credits		
0-30	1	14.3%
31-60	2	28.6%
61-90	2	28.6%
91-120	0	0.0%
120+	0	0.0%
Missing	2	28.6%
Admitted to Teacher Licensure Program	2	28.6%
Not Admitted, but Eligible for Admission into Teacher Licensure Program	5	71.4%

APPENDIX G
INTERMEDIATE GROUP CHARACTERISTICS

Intermediate Group Characteristics[a]

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent[b]
College Immediately After High School		
Yes	7	100.0%
No	0	0.0%
Transferred to Iowa State		
Yes	0	0.0%
No	7	100.0%
Previous Experience		
Head Teacher (Preschool/Daycare)	0	0.0%
Assistant Teacher (Preschool/Daycare)	4	57.1%
Home Daycare	0	0.0%
Elementary Teacher	0	0.0%
Assistant (Elementary Classroom)	1	14.3%
Babysitting	6	85.7%
Other	5	71.4%
Children of Own	0	0.0%

[a]N=7

[b] Because participants were able to respond to more than one appropriate answer, not all percentages equal 100%.

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Preferred Age Group		
Infants/Toddlers	0	0.0%
Preschoolers	4	57.1%
Kindergarteners	5	71.4%
1st-3rd Graders	5	71.4%
No Preference	0	0.0%
Completed College Credits		
0-30	0	0.0%
31-60	1	14.3%
61-90	2	28.6%
91-120	2	28.6%
120+	2	28.6%
Missing	0	0.0%
Admitted to Teacher Licensure Program	7	100.0%
Not Admitted, but Eligible for Admission into Teacher Licensure Program	0	0.0%

APPENDIX H
ADVANCED GROUP CHARACTERISTICS

Advanced Group Characteristics[a]

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent[b]
College Immediately After High School		
Yes	4	80.0%
No	1	20.0%
Transferred to Iowa State		
Yes	3	60.0%
No	2	40.0%
Previous Experience		
Head Teacher (Preschool/Daycare)	2	40.0%
Assistant Teacher (Preschool/Daycare)	5	100.0%
Home Daycare	0	0.0%
Elementary Teacher	0	0.0%
Assistant (Elementary Classroom)	1	20.0%
Babysitting	5	100.0%
Other	0	0.0%
Children of Own	0	0.0%

[a]N=5

[b] Because participants were able to respond to more than one appropriate answer, not all percentages equal 100%.

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Preferred Age Group		
Infants/Toddlers	0	0.0%
Preschoolers	3	60.0%
Kindergarteners	4	80.0%
1st-3rd Graders	3	60.0%
No Preference	0	0.0%
Completed College Credits		
0-30	0	0.0%
31-60	0	0.0%
61-90	0	0.0%
91-120	0	0.0%
120+	4	80.0%
Missing	1	20.0%
Admitted to Teacher Licensure Program	5	100.0%
Not Admitted, but Eligible for Admission into Teacher Licensure Program	0	0.0%

APPENDIX I
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CURRICULUM

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Iowa State University 1999-01 Catalog

(Jointly administered by Departments of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education and Human Development and Family Studies, College of Family and Consumer Sciences)

Meets Iowa teacher licensure requirements for Early Childhood Education Unified Teacher License

128.5 total semester credits required

(12.5) COMMUNICATIONS and LIBRARY

(3)	ENGL	104	First-Year Composition
(3)	ENGL	105	First-Year Composition
(.5)	LIB	160	Library Instruction
(3)	SP CM	212	Fundamentals of Public Speaking
(3)	Select from Communications Options (on reverse)		

(12) NATURAL SCIENCES and MATHEMATICS

(3)	FS HN	167	Introduction to Human Nutrition
(3)	MATH	195	Math for Elementary Education
(3)	Select 3 credits from physical sciences (see reverse)		
(3)	Select 3 credits from biological sciences (see reverse)		

(9) SOCIAL SCIENCES

(3)	Select from American government or American history
(6)	Select from CFCS approved list

(9) HUMANITIES

(9)	Select from CFCS approved list

(2) HEALTH, DANCE, PHYSICAL ED., SAFETY

(2)	H S	105	First Aid and Emergency Care

(12) HUMAN DEVELOPMENT and FAMILY STUDIES

(3)	HD FS	102	Individual and Family Life Development[1]
(3)	HD FS	220	Development and Guidance: Ages Birth - 2 years
(3)	HD FS	221	Development and Guidance: Ages 3-8
(3)	Select from:		
	HD FS	349	Parenting and Family Diversity Issues
	HD FS	395	Children, Families, and Public Policy
	HD FS	445	Administration of Programs for Children
	HD FS	449	Linking Families and Communities
	HD FS	460	Housing and Environments for Children

ORIENTATION (Family and Consumer Sciences)

(R)	FCEDS	110	FCS Orientation[1]
(R)	FCEDS	310	Career Opportunities[1]

(14) PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION CORE

(3)	C I	201	Introduction to Instructional Technology
(3)	C I	204	Social Foundations American Education
(2)	C I	406	Multicultural Awareness and Nonsexism in the Classroom
(3)	PSYCH	333	Educational Psychology
(3)	SP ED	250	Education of the Exceptional Learner

(21) PREPRIMARY: INCLUSIVE

(3)	HD FS	240	Literature For Children
(4)	HD FS	340	Assessment and Curriculum: Birth–2 Years
(4)	HD FS	343	Assessment and Programming: 3–6 Years
(3)	HD FS	345	Adapting Programming in Inclusive Settings
(4)	HD FS	455	Curricula for Ages 3–6
(3)	HD FS	456	Family Focused Interventions for Young Children

(21) PRIMARY: INCLUSIVE

(2)	C I	245	Strategies for Teaching
(1)	C I	268	Strategies Practicum
(4)	C I	367	Teaching Literacy in the Primary Grades
(2)	C I	433	Teaching Social Studies in the Primary Grades
(2)	C I	438	Teaching Math in the Primary Grades
(2)	C I	439	Teaching Science in the Primary Grades
(1)	C I	468F	Supervised Practicum in Teaching Primary Grades, Literacy, Inclusive
(1)	C I	468G	Supervised Practicum in Teaching Primary Grades, Mathematics, Inclusive
(1)	C I	468I	Supervised Practicum in Teaching Primary Grades, Science, Inclusive
(2)	SP ED	355	Classroom Assessment of Diverse Learners in the Primary Grades
(1)	SP ED	368	Issues in Literacy for Diverse Learners in Primary Grades
(2)	SP ED	455	Instructional Methods for Diverse Learners in Primary Grades

(16) PRIMARY GRADES, READING & LANGUAGE ARTS STUDENT TEACHING: PREPRIMARY/PRIMARY INCLUSIVE

(8)	SP ED	415	Supervised Student Teaching
(8)	HD FS	417B	Supervised Student Teaching–Preschool Programs

OR

(8)	C I	416A	Supervised Student Teaching–Primary Grades
(8)	HD FS	417C	Supervised Student Teaching–Early Childhood Special Education Programs

(0) ELECTIVES

[1]These courses fulfill the requirements for the CFCS core.

APPENDIX J
CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Focus Group Discussion: The Professional Perceptions of Early Childhood Education Preservice Teachers

The purpose of this focus group is to learn about the professional perceptions of early childhood education preservice teachers. During the focus group you will have the opportunity to share your opinions and ideas concerning the following issues:

1) Your philosophies and beliefs of early childhood education.
2) Factors that have influenced the development of your philosophies and beliefs of early childhood education.
3) Your goals and aspirations as you become a teacher of young children.

The following are basic ground rules for the focus group discussion:

- This is an open discussion and you can ask questions and respond to each other.
- I would like to hear from everyone.
- If you need to get up at any time, please feel free to do so.
- There are no right and wrong answers.
- Please respect others' opinions and statements.

In order to assure that the opinions and ideas shared in this focus group discussion remain confidential, I ask that you please sign the confidentiality agreement below.

As a participant in the focus group discussion concerning the professional perceptions of early childhood education preservice teachers, I agree not to discuss any of the opinions and ideas expressed nor any of the participants' identities with others.

_____ _____

Name Date

APPENDIX K
FOCUS GROUP GUIDES

Focus Group Guide for Beginner Group

1. Tell us your name and briefly about your experience working with young children.

2. First, I would like to talk about your decision to major in early childhood education. Why did you decide to major in ECE?

   What do you think influenced your decision to major in ECE?
   - Experience?
   - Classes?
   - Someone you know?
   - Family?

3. What do you enjoy about working with young children?

4. What do you believe is the purpose of early childhood education? What is early childhood education and why is it important?

5. How do you believe children learn?

6. What do you think is the teacher's role in early childhood education? What do teachers do?

7. Describe what you think is the teacher's responsibility in terms of working with families.

8. What do you think is difficult about working with children with special needs?

9. What do you think is difficult about working with young children?

   How are these challenges different from when you first started working with young children?

   What challenges do you think you will face in the future as an early childhood educator?

10. What are your strengths in working with young children? What are you good at?

11. Describe a good ECE teacher.

12. What are your goals as you become a teacher of young children?

Focus Group Guide for Intermediate Group

1. Tell us your name and briefly about your experience working with young children.

2. First, I would like to talk about your decision to major in early childhood education. Why did you decide to major in ECE?

   What do you think influenced your decision to major in ECE?
   - Experience?
   - Classes?
   - Someone you know?
   - Family?

3. What do you enjoy about working with young children?

4. What do you believe is the purpose of early childhood education? What is early childhood education and why is it important?

5. How do you believe children learn?

6. What do you believe is the teacher's role in early childhood education?
   - Children with special needs? Families?

7. How have your beliefs about early childhood education changed from when you first became an ECE major until now?

   What influenced your beliefs to change?
   - Experience?
   - Coursework?

8. How have your interactions or the ways you work with children changed from when you first became an ECE major until now?

9. What do you think is difficult about working with young children?

   How are these challenges different from when you first started working with young children?

   What challenges do you think you will face in the future as an early childhood educator?

10. What are your strengths in working with young children? What are you good at?

11. Describe a good ECE teacher. Qualities not good for an ECE teacher?

12. What are your goals as you become a teacher of young children?

Focus Group Guide for Advanced Group

1. Tell us your name and briefly about your experience working with young children.

2. First, I would like to talk about your decision to major in early childhood education. Why did you decide to major in ECE?

   What do you think influenced your decision to major in ECE?
   - Experience?
   - Classes?
   - Someone you know?
   - Family?

3. What do you enjoy about working with young children?

4. What do you believe is the purpose of early childhood education? What is early childhood education and why is it important?

5. How do you believe children learn?

6. What do you believe is the teacher's role in early childhood education? Children with special needs? Families?

7. How have your beliefs about early childhood education changed from when you first became an ECE major until now?

   What influenced your beliefs to change?
   - Experience?
   - Coursework?

8. How have your interactions or the ways you work with children changed from when you first became an ECE major until now?

9. What do you think is difficult about working with young children?

   How are these challenges different from when you first started working with young children?

   What challenges do you think you will face in the future as an early childhood educator?

10. What are your goals as you become a teacher of young children?

APPENDIX L
INTERVIEW GUIDES

Interview Questions for Beginner Group

1. Describe the relationship you want to have with the children with whom you work. Describe the relationship you want to have with the children's families.

2. Talk a little bit about your beliefs about inclusion. How have these beliefs changed from when you first decided to major in ECE until now? Why do think they have changed?

3. What skills do you believe teachers need to have to be successful working in an inclusive setting?

4. What are some things that a teacher can do to help all children to be successful in an integrated setting?

5. What do you believe are the challenges that teachers face when working in an inclusive setting?

6. As you know, all ECE majors receive a unified degree from our department. ? If you had the choice, would you have chosen special education or regular education? Was this change made after you had already decided to major in ECE? How did you feel about that change? How do you feel now? What caused your feelings to change?

7. How have your beliefs about guidance and the ways you handle guidance situations in your classroom changed from when you first became and ECE major until now? Why have they changed?

8. Describe the skills or knowledge that you think early childhood educators should help young children develop. These may be different for different age groups.

9. In the focus group, you talked about the fact that in Early Childhood Education, teachers are often called upon to meet the needs of children that may not be getting met at home or elsewhere. Can you talk a little about that? What kind of needs? How can we meet them?

10. In the focus groups, one thing that kept coming up was the idea that your philosophies as an early childhood educator may be different from those held by the school district or program that you work in. Can you talk a little bit about that idea? In what ways do you think your philosophies may differ? Why will they differ? How will you handle that?

Interview Questions for Intermediate Students

1. Describe the relationship you want to have with the children with whom you work. Describe the relationship you want to have with the children's families.

2. In the focus groups we talked a lot about the teacher's role in early childhood education. One thing that came up was the role of the teacher in educating parents. Can you talk a little about this role of parent education? When is it necessary? What kinds of things do you teach parents?

3. Talk a little bit about your beliefs about inclusion. How have these beliefs changed from when you first decided to major in ECE until now? Why do think they have changed?

4. What skills do you believe teachers need to have to be successful working in an inclusive setting?

5. What are some things that a teacher can do to help all children to be successful in an integrated setting?

6. What do you believe are the challenges that teachers face when working in an inclusive setting?

7. As you know, all ECE majors receive a unified degree from our department. ? If you had the choice, would you have chosen special education or regular education? Was this change made after you had already decided to major in ECE? How did you feel about that change? How do you feel now? What caused your feelings to change?

8. How have your beliefs about guidance and the ways you handle guidance situations in your classroom changed from when you first became and ECE major until now? Why have they changed?

9. Describe the skills or knowledge that you think early childhood educators should help young children develop. These may be different for different age groups.

10. In the focus groups, one thing that kept coming up was the idea that your philosophies as an early childhood educator may be different from those held by the school district or program that you work in. Can you talk a little bit about that idea? In what ways do you think your philosophies may differ? Why will they differ? How will you handle that?

Interview Questions for Advanced Students

1. Describe the relationship you want to have with the children with whom you work. Describe the relationship you want to have with the children's families.

2. In the focus groups we talked a lot about the teacher's role in early childhood education. One thing that came up was the role of the teacher in educating parents. Can you talk a little about this role of parent education? When is it necessary? What kinds of things do you teach parents?

3. Talk a little bit about your beliefs about inclusion. How have these beliefs changed from when you first decided to major in ECE until now? Why do think they have changed?

4. What skills do you believe teachers need to have to be successful working in an inclusive setting?

5. What are some things that a teacher can do to help all children to be successful in an integrated setting?

6. What do you believe are the challenges that teachers face when working in an inclusive setting?

7. As you know, all ECE majors receive a unified degree from our department. If you had the choice, would you have chosen special education or regular education? Was this change made after you had already decided to major in ECE? How did you feel about that change? How do you feel now? What caused your feelings to change?

8. How have your beliefs about guidance and the ways you handle guidance situations in your classroom changed from when you first became and ECE major until now? Why have they changed?

9. Describe the skills or knowledge that you think early childhood educators should help young children develop. These may be different for different age groups.

10. One thing I noticed from the focus groups is that several of you talked about how your confidence has increased from when you were first an ECE major until now. In what areas has your confidence increased? Are there areas that you feel less confident in? Are you more confident working with a specific age group? Why?

11. Several of you also mentioned that one of your goals as you become a teacher of young children is to continue learning. Talk a little about that. What do you think/hope you will continue to learn?

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